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screening
the new WORLD order



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no.33

Screening the New World Order

The Imperial West's triumphal proclamation of a New World Order has become an embarrassment, even to its apologists. Victory in the Cold War is looking increasingly pyrrhic: the restoration of capitalism in the former Communist regimes has brought little but economic destruction and misery, genocidal civil wars, dictatorships and resurgent racist nationalisms. The democratic aspirations of the friends of the West are laughably contingent. Memory of the glorious massacres of the Gulf War has dimmed. Now Canadian and American soldiers torture and slaughter Somalian civilians to save them from famine. The "white man's burden," unrestrained by Soviet power, is an onerous one indeed.

The determinist necessity of so-called globalization relentlessly proclaims its IMF structural adjustment starvation throughout the third world and the former second world. But that conquest of markets and nations is synchronized with deep structural recession everywhere. The forces of "restructuring" spin out of control of national capital and its international organizations. Few still talk of the "end of history" in a world order so brittle it can be shaken by a few thousand Mexican peasants.

In most ways, the new world order is continuous with the old world order - it is 500 years and counting. Films and filmmakers have made sense and made entertainment of the conquests and resistances, the ravages and contradictions. The articles collected here respond to that history and its most recent confusing and contradictory developments and possible trajectories.

We can follow the West's wondrous adventures of discovery into the future, into space. Hollywood, and American culture's enduring obsession with race entrances us in startling and intense ways. Colonized peo-

ples culturally confront their colonizers differently in a globalization carried by media technology. That technology plays a particularly central role as myth and commodity in the utopian discourse of capital. Film-makers in China, ostensibly communist and actually undergoing a wrenching capitalist modernization, confront the contradictions of the historical moment directly.

The issue also contains reviews of films premiering at Toronto's Festival of Festivals and letters concerning the journal's most recent controversy.

I would like to thank
Chris Darroch for editorial
assistance with this issue.

Scott Forsyth

Star Trek

- the Voyages of Discovery

From 1492 to the Space Age

Star Trek, like all drama, is about us,
you and I, the human condition. The human condition doesn't age.
Gene Roddenberry, creator of
Star Trek

Much like the myths of primitive society, North American popular culture evinces its own set of myths which tend to get worked and reworked in an attempt to resolve contradictions inherent in society at large (Fiske, 1985). Television is a major circulator of these myths. Through the use of familiar signs, evoking connotations and denotations, television programs and ads serve as second-order myths (Barthes, 1973). In fact, some theorists have argued that television functions as a modern-day 'bard' (Fiske and Hartley, 1978), performing the functions of story-telling and communicating morals and values, as did the bard of the oral tradition in pre-literate societies. And in the 'retribalized' nature of contemporary society, television as our modern day bard facilitates the building of networks across time and space (McLuhan, 1962), and resonates with our proclivity towards orality as a main mode of communication (Ong, 1980).

Within this context of contemporary myths, the structure of appeal inherent in such widely popular programs as *Star Trek*, and its current counterpart, *Star Trek, the Next Generation*, need to be re-examined in terms of how and where they coincide with audience 'needs,' and what they articulate as their central message. Such contextualization would necessarily have to take into account the function that science fiction as a genre performs. For the latter served and continues to serve a particular historical need, a need perhaps best articulated by Mumford's allusion to the

Sorcerer's apprentice (1934). Would technology serve humankind or would it turn against humankind? Would technology have to be controlled or would it in fact run out of control, and then attempt to control man.

by
Yasmin Jiwani



'Man versus machines' as a binary opposition underlies much of science fiction in its written and visual forms. And whereas the early literature within the genre simplified the tensions between man and machine, contemporary reworkings of this inherently contradictory relationship tend to go beyond the first stage of a mere binary opposition. Like the famed British television series *Dr. Who*, the point becomes one of explicating 'good' technology as opposed to 'bad' technology. Fiske (1984), in his illuminating study of the *Dr. Who* series, points to how technology owned and operated by the good doctor, takes on the moral and political hues of its owner. It becomes 'good' technology by virtue of its owner and by the ends towards which it is strategically used, namely, to cure sick societies, restore balance in the universe, and annihilate those who stand in the way of harmony and order.

However, unlike *Dr. Who* with its emphasis on the nature of technology, its curative powers and its use to avert evil (as representing anything that stands against order and stability), *Star Trek* combines a number of overlapping discourses that contribute to its structure of appeal and enhance its resonance with the socially structured experiences of its viewers. It is this point of relevance, historical resonance and elective affinities that forms the line of inquiry pursued here. For, at the heart of both the old and new *Star Trek* is the program's self-defined thematic core: a voyage of discovery into the unknown, best articulated in the preamble to "go where **no man** has gone before," or in the contemporary version of *The Next Generation*, to "go where **no one** has gone before." And carrying us on this intergalactic voyage of discovery is the U.S.S. Enterprise, embodying the slick, smooth, economical character of super-space age technology, reminding us in subtle ways, of other such voyages of discovery which began circa 1492, when Columbus set sail to "discover" the 'New World.'

For to discover something anew, is to begin a project anew. It is to wipe out history by starting with a clean slate. The seeming optimism embedded in such an outlook is part of this program series structure of appeal. But the notion of 'discovery' itself is a key problematic and a point of ideological condensation. To 'discover' is to assume that no other living entity has ever seen or been to a particular location/site, or perceived the phenomenon that has been discovered. In the context of the series, it assumes that space is a vast, open, unpopu-

lated area. This sense of an area being empty, of its indigenous inhabitants as being inconsequential, is a key thread in many of the accounts of the early explorers to the Americas, Africa, India and the Far East (Said, 1979).² To conceive of something as empty then removes the responsibility of violating territorial rights from those entering occupied spaces.

Star Trek - The Phenomenon

First telecast from 1966 to 1969, *Star Trek* was an abysmal failure as far as ratings were concerned. However, by 1972, it had been syndicated to over 125 stations and shown in sixty different countries.³ Its subsequent success generated spin-offs ranging from an animated cartoon series, conventions, fan clubs, magazines, costumes, toys and other such gadgets. By 1975, *Star Trek* conventions in New York and Chicago were well known as riot scenes when 20,000 fans showed up exceeding the organizers' expectations.⁴ Extensive lobbying by 'Trekkies' and/or 'Trekkers', (the show's fans), culminated in Paramount's move to produce a number of motion pictures dealing with the star-ship, its crew, and their adventures in deep space. By 1991, the series and films had produced \$2 billion in revenues (Parkert, 1991).

Some indications regarding the size of the show's following can be gleaned from the fact that in 1990, there were 35,000 subscribers to the *Star Trek* fan magazine which was started in 1979.⁵ Newspaper accounts assess the show's following at around 300,000 in the United States alone. However, by the end of 1989, Pocket Books had sold 18 million copies of *Star Trek* books and novels.⁶ And, *Star Trek's* successor, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, has become one of the few syndicated shows to tie at a number 1 position on network television.⁷

² The parallels here with sexism are striking, as for instance in the defining of a particular territory as 'virgin' territory. The colonialist enterprise, seen from this perspective, then resembles the rape of this 'virgin' land.

³ Statistics from 'Will Star Trek ever die?', *Vancouver Province*, July 28, 1972. According to this report, over 4,000 people attended the Star Trek convention in New York in 1971.

⁴ *Globe and Mail*, July 24, 1976.

⁵ *Vancouver Province*, January 9, 1990.

⁶ *Vancouver Province*, June 19, 1989.

⁷ *Vancouver Province*, June 23, 1991.



On the Outskirts of Empire/Federation

While the model of classical colonialism as a way of understanding the world has now become passe - at least in the domain of discourse, in the realm of popular pleasures, the notion of 'empire' remains well and alive. Hollywood and British films continue to exploit the glories of the Empire as is evident in the spate of films that celebrate the zenith of the Raj in India, or the extension of America's manifest destiny to the Third World. However, the notion of empire that is celebrated in these cultural productions is not simply confined to an historical incident, or to its neocolonial manifestation in contemporary politics, but is also reworked and reproduced in popular cultural forms that deal with the domestic and futuristic arenas of social life.

Furthermore, the range of techniques used to subordinate the dispossessed vary, much as they varied in the heyday of empire-building. Through commodification, exoticization and erotization, and through the marginalization of difference, difference becomes colonized in a multitude of ways. But the positioning of an element as being different - as standing outside the pale of the known, is at the crux of the relationship between the conqueror and the conquered, the colonizer and the colonized. And this is where *Star Trek* becomes relevant, for the show is a site of several overlapping discourses: the discourse of knowledge, and its connotations of a 'quest' or the fulfilment of a moral/religious obligation as in the idea of a pilgrimage to a source; knowledge as power, and power as exercised through domination, containment and consent.⁸

The Empire became the rationale and the outcome of the voyages of discovery; it represented the centre from which forays into the unknown could be undertaken. It also symbolized the home to which explorers returned and which they enriched with loot stolen from lands afar. And finally, the Empire represents the mother of all colonies; she is the beneficent protector and the partial judge of all matters. She becomes mother by virtue of the explorer sons that she sent out on voyages of discovery; the accumulation of the knowledge that these discoveries produced, and the subsequent power she wielded over the lands she had come to know. The Empire of yesterday is the Federation of the future in the world of *Star Trek* and its offspring, *The Next Generation*.

Star Trek - Keeping Law and Order in the Universe

According to Gene Roddenberry, creator of the series, *Star Trek* was conceived as a "wagon train of the stars." The attempt was to sell the program as a space-age western given the popularity of the latter genre.⁹ Yet, even though the crew "were non-violent and respected all life forms," the fact that the program was conceived as a western enabled the slippage of certain ideological connotations that accentuated its overall message: a message that coheres around the theme of colonization and the depiction of "Other" beings and races through which the colonizing force recognizes itself and valorizes itself as a superior mental and technological entity.¹⁰ This is part of the series' basic structure of appeal.

As in the classical westerns where the lone cowboy rides to the wild west of the frontier, ostensibly to extend civilization, rescue females in distress and single handedly fight the 'bad' guys, so too does our crew in *Star Trek*. But this time, the play between the forces of civilization (order) and savagery (disorder) occurs in the backdrop of the universe. In both cases, the aim is to extend the boundaries of 'civilization' by first, exploring and naming those areas of space and the world that are outside the boundaries of the known and controlled.¹¹ Hence, in conquering space, Captain Kirk and his crew are in fact conquering the modern day wilderness - that unexploited and unmarked terrain that surrounds the world as defined by the 'Federation.' In the same vein, much as the cowboy encountered indigenous people and amazed (in his eyes) them with his technology - his gun and his quickdraw, so too does Captain Kirk and his gang use superior technology to subdue, annihilate, astound and conquer any opposing forces that impede their 'exploration' of space. In the rare case where the technologies of both parties are equally sophisticated, a stalemate is likely to ensue. The crew concedes that it

⁸ There are obvious parallels here between the plots of various *Star Trek* episodes and the predominant strands that characterize colonial literature, as is evident for example, in the works of Rider Haggard (Stott, 1989).

⁹ *Vancouver Province*, February 9, 1981.

¹⁰ See for instance, the key features of colonialism as identified by Said (1979), Memmi (1965), Césaire (1972).

¹¹ See for instance, Edward Said's explication of the motives underlying the voyages of exploration that grew out of and reproduced Orientalism as a way of perceiving and comprehending a constructed Other (Said, 1979).



has met a superior alien force and moves away onto other planets, galaxies and life-forms that are more amenable to conquest.

Conquest in the space age takes several forms, all of which are reminiscent of colonialism. There are several instances, particularly in *The Next Generation*, where the crew simply wish to take a sample of the new and alien life-form back to earth. One is reminded here of the time when Columbus brought back with him several natives as samples of what labour power was available in the 'New World.'¹² The taking back of samples, the cataloging of life-forms, these are all tactics of a strategy of knowledge as power. The more knowledge one has of one's enemies, the more likely can one disarm them should the need arise.

The appeal of both the new and old *Star Treks* lies in their use of loaded oppositions to create meaning. The crew of both star ships is defined in terms of its 'humanizing' mission - to extend the dictates, ways of being, perceiving and values of the Enterprise to the non-colonized worlds they encounter. This theme echoes the justifying beliefs of the early colonizers - the missionaries, and their attempts to domesticate the savage by imparting to him/her, ways of being, values and beliefs of Christianity.¹³ The humanity of the Enterprise is contrasted with the lack of such humanity ascribed to alien races. Either they are at the bottom

of the evolutionary path - having to travel a long distance before being 'human-like', or else they may have superior technological powers but lack human attributes that would give them equal status. One is reminded here of the encounter between the crew of *The Next Generation* and Q - an alien life-form who is omnipotent. However, even though superior in every way, Q lacks the morality of humankind and hence, is accorded a lesser status.

Against this 'humanizing' mission of the Enterprise crew, we are constantly confronted with those 'savage' races as the Klingons, Romulans, and the Ferengis. These mortal races are scripted in a way as to emphasize their difference and their 'savagery' when compared and contrasted with the clean-cut crew of the star ships. Only those races who are willing accomplices in the colonizing process are permitted to retain any dignity or grace, as for example, the Klingon Worf (played by Michael Dorn). Yet, the astonishing thing is that while the Enterprise can continue its journey of exploration unabated, the journeys of exploration of these other races are cast as being threatening to the stability of the cosmos, and the power of the Federation. Their very freedom spells the need to have it contained, defused or trivialized (as in the case of the Ferengis).¹⁴ One is reminded once again of the man-

ner in which the old communist world was pitted against the capitalist world, rendered as the enemy, and where non-aligned nations were castigated as threats to the stability of the global system.

The impetus to sign treaties with these distant planets in far off galaxies, and to bring them within the sovereign orbit of the Federation mirrors what occurred during the height of colonization, as can be evidenced in the treaties that were signed with native peoples in North America. Where nations were reluctant to facilitate their own conquest, the path towards subjugation was paved by the introduction of arms causing a destabilization of existing power relations; a destruction of indigenous economies by the implementation of a cash economy, and the suppression of traditional cultural practices. These tactics of colonization are amply demonstrated in the various episodes of the old *Star Trek*, where Kirk and his crew intervene in various planetary events while still verbally adhering to the principle of the prime directive; the prime directive forbids direct intervention into any planet's internal politics or way of life. Yet, in virtually all episodes, while the prime directive is mentioned, the intervention nevertheless occurs and its ramifications are apparent to anyone who watches the program from a position which is sympathetic to the role of the 'villain'.¹⁵ In fact the plot is structured in such a way as to render the intervention necessary if the captain and/or the landing party are to survive.

Technological equipment dazzles the primitive inhabitants of many of these strange planets, and their hunger to access the same power often leads to more than just a physical struggle. This struggle is manifested in a display of tactics that parallel those which resistance movements in contemporary politically repressive situations choose to engage in to counter their oppression. Hence, in one episode of *Star Trek the Next Generation*, we are treated to a situation that closely resembles the Palestinian condition in the Occupied Territories. (Palestinian) Guerilla warfare is objectionable to our reasoned captain Jean-Luc Picard.¹⁶ Yet, in an unequal power situation, what choices do rebel forces have? Through our identification with the captain and his crew, we are quickly persuaded of the import of the prime directive and as soon as the task at hand is completed, we zoom away from this troubled planet. Here, the use of the prime directive effectively works to curtail any kind of active intervention that might equalize the disparity in power relations between the two sides. At the same time, the metaphoric rela-

tionship is obfuscated as we are convinced that both these parties are independent and have no external source of power and support. Israel's complex and interdependent relationship with the United States is too dangerous a truth to be included in this allegorical intraplanetary conflict portrayed in the show. Rather, we have a quaint, clear-cut rewriting of history and a dislocation of entities from their socio-historical or political contexts. It is in essence a specular, floating world that *Star Trek* presents.¹⁷

In both *Star Treks*, the crew represents power relations that are extant in colonizing societies. We have a token representations of people of colour - with Uhuru (Nichelle Nichols) in the old *Star Trek*, and the engineer, Lieutenant Geordi La Forge (LeVar Burton) in *The Next Generation*. Similarly, women are represented as quintessentially emotional as in the empath Deanna Troi (Marina Sirtis) and Guinan (Whoopi Goldberg), the intuitive black, intergalactic barmaid in *The Next Generation*. Racial differences are levelled with other differences, as in the case of the android, Data (Brent Spiner) in *The Next Generation*, or in Spock (Leonard Nimoy) in the old *Star Trek*. These differences become specu-

¹² In this regard, see Schneider's (1977) account of the rise of popular ethnography.

¹³ In this regard, Harold Isaacs (1958) provides a fascinating account of the early American missionaries to India and China and their reaction to these lands and their inhabitants. Despite being disgusted by the natives, the missionaries felt that their missionizing work - the extension of Christianity - was of such import that it required them to have a heightened fortitude to tolerate the savagery of the natives.

¹⁴ The characterization of the Fereng is highly reminiscent of the ways in which the British painted the Indian merchant, as a character driven by greed and avarice (Greenberger, 1969).

¹⁵ Yet it is interesting to note that Roddenberry, the creator of the series, construed the anti-Vietnam movement as being influenced by the emphasis and central location of the prime directive in the old *Star Trek* programs. (*Vancouver Province*, July 28, 1972.)

¹⁶ The deliberate use of a French name evokes associations with French colonialism, high culture, the literary tradition, Napoleon and other such aspects of the French tradition and constructed self-image. The ideological choice of such a name becomes more pronounced when one considers the character of actor Patrick Stewart, who is well known for his love of Shakespeare and the British literary tradition. So, within Picard, we have the condensation of two colonial traditions - the French and English. Picard embodies 'reason' within the conceptual field of the characters that make up the Enterprise crew. The significance of this is not diminished by the fact that his emotional and impulsive counterpart is also a white male - Commander Riker (played by Jonathan Frakes).

¹⁷ On the notion of the specular, see Angus (1988).

lar. They float at a surface level, hinting at the connotations and denotations that have been associated with them over time.

Denuded of their historical and social significance, these differences remain just that - differences of a kind. Yet, they carry with them connotations of the historical residues and ideologies that ascribe to such differences, a difference in mentality. This is most apparent in the case of Spock whose physical differences communicate a difference in mentality. The viewers impute these connotations to the figures they see represented. Hence, it "makes sense" to have a black, intuitive barmaid because most programs that feature black women tend to slot them in subordinate positions as in maids. It "makes sense" to see women as empaths and nurses or doctors, since their representation has traditionally been confined within a nurturing role. Even the role of the Klingon security officer, Worf (Michael Dorn), is carefully designed to convey the impression of equality. But Worf's warlike attributes and his animalistic nature continue to be emphasized in episode after episode - in fact, they are crucial to his role as a security officer. He represents the containment of difference, where the containment itself appears perilously close to giving way. He is the savage whose domestication can only go so far. But his fierce loyalty, commitment to duty and honour, evoke associations of an image of the faithful old dog.

Star Trek, and its contemporary counterpart, *The Next Generation*, provide the modern ethnographer with contemporary visual texts regarding the myths that are operational in society today. This is most apparent in the plots that are dealt with in the series, as well as in the interactions between the crew. For instance, within *The Next Generation*, the following characterizations are recast within various combinations and permutations, according to the parameters of the story-line. Our team of explorers consists of the following:

Captain Jean-Luc Picard - who embodies the 'best' of both the English and French colonial traditions. His role evokes associations with Napoleon; his 'reasoned' and literate background evokes images of the learned Englishman, ever curious and committed to the quest for knowledge.

Cdr. William Riker - A stereotyped characterization of the pirate adventurer. He represents the impulsive and reckless foil to Picard's reasoned demeanour. He is quick to anger and apparently loves women.

Lt. Geordi La Forge - A black man with a Scottish name, reflecting back to the time when slavery required that all slaves have their master's names. La Forge is blind and is only able to see through a visor device that covers his eyes. Technically blind, he functions as the eyes to the limited vision of the Captain and his first officer, but yet physically remains in the bowels of the star-ship. However, as one of the only black males present in the show, his blindness assumes a heightened ideological significance.

Lt. Worf - A Klingon whose internal colonization enables him to function within the Enterprise as a chief security officer, a position he was bequeathed by Denise Crosby who left the series in 1988. Worf's character is depicted as an animalistic Klingon whose savage or undomesticated desires are barely kept in check. This pronounced ferocity has an ideological fit with his role as security officer. His behaviour and demeanour evoke images of a faithful dog. His sense of loyalty, discipline and total commitment are accentuated in every episode. Yet, Worf's appearance also resembles an 'ape' suggesting his position at the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder.

Dr. Beverly Crusher - one of the two white females, Crusher is an interesting departure from the previous *Star Trek*'s Dr. McCoy, an eccentric and sarcastic character. She is more nurturant, ethical and clinical. Her maternal side is enhanced by the presence of her son, Wesley Crusher on the Enterprise. She is portrayed as having a soft spot for the Captain.

Counselor Deanna Troi - is half human, half beta-zoid. Her special empathic abilities make her an asset to the crew, although she is rarely shown as being able to detect anything other than fear, distrust or goodwill. Troi replaces Dr. Spock whose logical capabilities have now been transferred to Picard. Troi also exemplifies the stereotypical female trait of intuitiveness. Interestingly, she is represented as a white woman, and as her name implies, evokes associations with Helen of Troy. Her black counterpart is a guest role played by Whoopie Goldberg.

Lt. Cmdr. Data - an android whose golden skin and glassy eyes belie his utmost desire to be human. Data represents 'good' technology; technology which is almost human and which aids humans in their quest for knowledge.

With the right combination of reason (Picard), adventure (Riker), scientific knowledge/good technology (Data, a walking computer), empathic abilities (Troi), a nurturing sensibility (Crusher), and protection (Worf), we are able to conquer worlds in a liberal, humanistic way. The only anomaly is La Forge, a black male, disabled and yet enabled by his eyesight. However, within a humanist outlook, disabled and coloured people can be accommodated. One only has to find the right technological device to convert their disabilities and drawbacks into positive attributes. And in essence, when shaping the series, Roddenberry's intent was to project a futuristic society that would, by all obvious accounts, defuse the threat of difference and make acceptable that which is unacceptable. However, while this may hold true for the crew of the Enterprise in *The Next Generation*, their encounter with alien life-forms proves otherwise. These futuristic interactions merely rewrite colonial encounters which took the forms of paternalism, antagonism, apartheid, and annihilation, depending on the life-forms that were encountered and their openness to join the Empire.

Thus, both the old *Star Trek* and its contemporary version, the *Next Generation*, continue to generate audience following through their retelling of a very old story - the conquest of the earth as undertaken by the colonizing nations. By the late 1800s, 85% of the world's surface was colonized by the European powers (Said, 1979). One can only extrapolate that by the time, *Star Trek*, the *Next Generation* becomes obsolete, virtually all of space will have been colonized by America in its quest to fulfil its manifest destiny. The Enterprise represents 'good technology' - technology that extends the boundaries of the Federation, 'frees' people from oppressive governments and traditional ways of life. It is technology, according to imperialism, that is used for exploration, for defense against an offense, and for the protection of the larger social order - the new World Order. The question is: Are we talking about space, or does this sound dangerously familiar and terrestrial?

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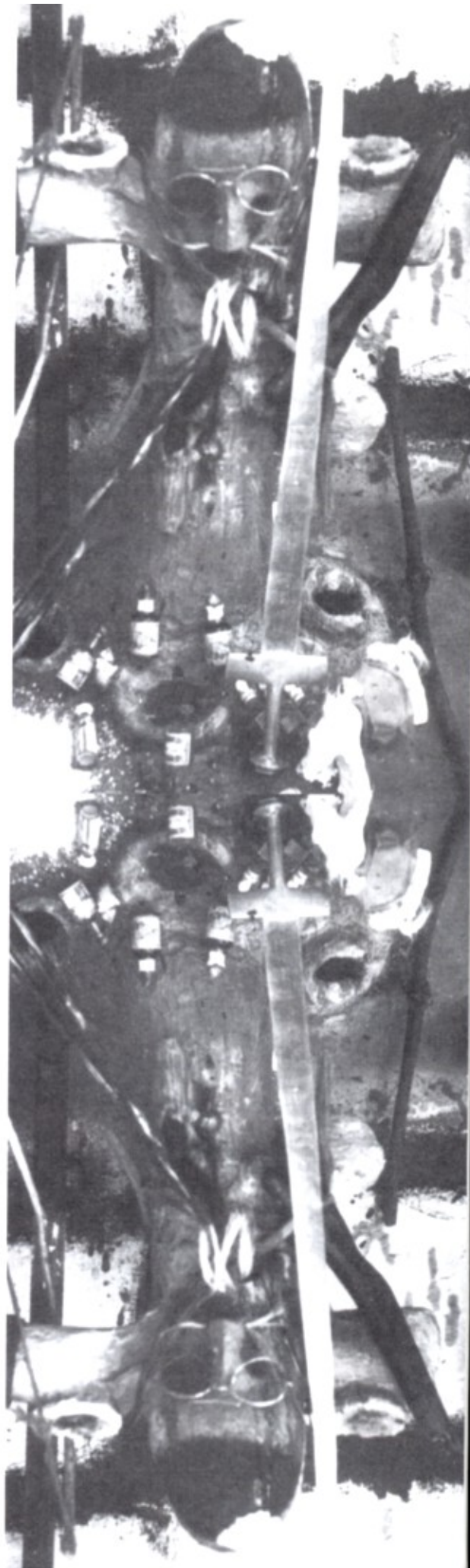
**by
Scott
MacKenzie**

Nature creates similarities. One only need think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's. His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role.

Walter Benjamin,
"On the Mimetic Faculty"¹

In *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig offers a highly peculiar example of the mimetic faculty. A photograph depicts a Nigerian mud sculpture of a white man in a pith helmet, with one fist raised in the air.² It is hard to imagine why this totem was built and what exact function it served; nevertheless, it offers an eerie example of the art of the colonized "other" staring back in "white face." Why would Nigerians want to build a totem to white invaders? To answer this question, one must reexamine the often binary debates between "colonizer" and "colonized" and "self" and "other," to explore the mimetic interchange that often plays itself out in culture, through film, and more recently, through video.

The role played by mimesis and mimetic power in political resistance in both the "new" and "old" world orders is complex, as the mimetic faculty blurs simple distinctions between "us" and "them." For instance, in the colonial and postcolonial contexts, is mimetic ritual an oppressive or emancipatory process? Who engages in mimetic activity and what is their relationship to institutional and cultural power? In the following pages, I address the question of mimesis, drawing on debates within anthropology and from a number of examples in visual ethnography that problematize "mimesis," "mimetic power," and



the "mimetic faculty." A shift seems to have taken place between the "old" to the "new" world order in the supposed "global village": in the colonial past, mimesis was often used to subvert, scare, and destabilize the colonizer; in the postcolonial world, with the advent of video technology and the "new" world order of globalization, the camera itself often becomes the instigator of mimetic practice. This shift points to the new ground that resistance is fought upon: resistance politics seem to increasingly relocate their focus to the realm of representation.

The "old" world order of mimetic resistance is apparent in many of the rituals that developed within the colonized world. The totem described above is one example; another is the Hauka possession ritual. As Michael Taussig points out, the Hauka "began among the Songhay people in 1925; [the participants] would dance and become possessed by the spirits of the colonial administrators."³ The ritual itself is therefore intrinsically tied to the history of colonialism. Jean Rouch's *Les Maîtres fous* (1953-4),⁴ a "trance film," documents the Hauka possession of Ghanaians mimicking colonialists, frothing at the mouth, and eventually sacrificing a dog and drinking its blood. As the film begins, we are introduced to various Ghanaian workers. The workers, who are described as "normal" in every way, depart for the weekend, in order to partake in the yearly possession ritual. Rouch documents each step of the process: the admittance of new members, the purging of the sins of the returning members, and the possession itself. At first, the film seems to uphold the construction of otherness that is so often found in ethnographic cinema: viewers watch a bizarre set of practices that seem totally alien, but are explained away by an authoritative voice-over. But then a dramatic shift takes place. Halfway through the film, Rouch compares the Hauka to the ritual pageantry of the British colonial soldiers. Taussig outlines the effect of this juxtaposition:

A man possessed by a Hauka spirit stoops and breaks an egg over the sculpted figure of the governor [. . .] that presides over the day's event of Hauka possession. Cracked on the governor's head, the egg cascades in white and yellow rivulets. Then the film is abruptly cut. We are transported to a big military parade in the colonial city two hours away. The film hurls at us the cascading yellow and white plumes of the white governor's hat as he reviews the black troops passing. Those of

us watching the film in a university lecture hall in New York City gasp.⁵

This moment in the film functions as a synthesis of Sergei Eisenstein's theory of intellectual montage and Walter Benjamin's notion of the "dialectical image."⁶ This radical juxtaposition brings out the latent meanings in these images of first and third world rituals; meanings that are typically left repressed and unspoken. The images of possession suddenly make sense, while the colonial pageantry seems denaturalized. The rest of the film takes on a dramatically different tone, as both the Hauka and the British pageantry seem to explode with heretofore unrecognized meanings. Following Benjamin's thesis of history, these meanings are not "constructed" on the part of the filmmaker, but are related to the repressed or *ur*-histories of both the colonialist and Hauka movements.⁷

After the cut to the British ceremony, the role of the mimetic faculty in the Hauka ritual comes to the forefront. Each of the participants in the trance plays out a role derived from the British colonial hierarchy. There is the wicked major, the general, the general's wife, and many others, all of whom perform roles derived from the British hierarchy. Eventually, the participants come out of the trance and resume their day-to-day existence. As the film ends, we see the workers back at work in their subjugated roles, with Rouch's sardonic voice-over pointing to the fact that by acting out the roles of the colonialists, the Ghanaians stay sane, exorcising their white demons in the process. It is interesting to note that the power of mimesis lies not only in the editing of the film: the practice of the Hauka was so despised by colonial governments that practitioners were jailed.

Les Maîtres fous offers interesting insights into the mimetic faculty, both in terms of ritualized practice and the mimetic power of the cinema itself. Images which at first are unintelligible, showing the practices of a culture that western audiences cannot immediately understand, are given a very specific colonial context halfway through the film; the Ghanaians are mimicking the often fearful and merciless power that they are subjugated by on a daily basis. The reference to the British colonial context (the marching bands, etc.) is not present to give the viewers a familiar frame of reference; the British pageantry does not explain away the Hauka. The flowing plumage and the running egg are present because they are part of the rituals themselves. The people of Ghana adapt the European ritual to their

own ends and, in the process, recontextualize the symbols of the colonizer's world, demonstrating both the pomposity and cruelty of the naturalized colonialist rituals. It is this act of denaturalization the colonialists feared and despised, as Taussig writes: "The British authorities in Ghana banned the film. The reason? According to Rouch they 'equated the picture of the Governor with an insult to the Queen and her authority.' But what was the insult? It turns out to be exactly that moment [...] where the mimetic power of the film piggy-backs on the mimetic power of African possession ritual."⁸ Colonialism, a concept that had been naturalized as an outgrowth of "progress" and "civilization" is recontextualized into ritual, while "untranslatable" ritual becomes transformed and constituted through the colonialist presence. Significantly, both western colonialism and non-western ritual are seen as escapes, yet it is the non-western ritual that, according to the voice-over, preserves the sanity of the people of the Ghana.

The Hauka demonstrates how the explosive underpinnings of mimesis can emerge and recontextualize or reframe the meaning of a practice. Much the same way that the mimetic practice of the Hauka recontextualizes the colonial experience for the people of Ghana, the juxtaposition of the Hauka ritual with colonial ceremony shocks the viewer into seeing connections she has not seen before; not only does the experience make the viewer aware of the relationship between the supposedly "untranslatable" culture practice of possession and western oppression, it also points to the more irrational elements of the colonialist ceremony.⁹ *Les Maitres fous*, then, functions as an indictment of "old" world colonialism; in the "old" world order, mimetic practice is seen unambiguously as resistance.

In *Ritual and Process*, Victor Turner contends that status reversal, similar to the kind found in *Les Maitres fous*, is a type of ritual performed by structurally inferior, or the permanently weak and marginalized members of a society. Turner defines ritual status reversal in the following manner: "At certain culturally defined points in the seasonal cycle, groups and categories of persons who habitually occupy low status positions in the social structure are positively enjoined to exercise ritual authority over their superiors; and they, in their turn, must accept with good will their ritual degradation."¹⁰ Turner contends that there are two contrasting social models in each human society: the structured, typically hierarchical, model of "jural, political, and

economic positions, offices, statuses and roles, in which the individual is only ambiguously grasped behind the social persona. The other is of society as a *communitas* of concrete idiosyncratic individuals, who [...] are regarded as equal in terms of shared humanity."¹¹ Most societies oscillate between structure and *communitas*; structure is the ordering principle, while *communitas* lends itself to social mobility, fluidity, and individual idiosyncrasy. Each society consists of members who are structurally inferior and structurally superior social agents within the social structure. For Turner, status reversal, which he sees as connected to cyclical patterns of ritual or calendrical rites, do not provide the structurally inferior with access to power. Instead, status reversal temporarily grants the structurally inferior the fantasy of structural superiority. Role reversal realigns these opposing parts of the social structure. Mimetic power, then, is a force of stabilization in culture, but the temporary power it grants the disen-

¹ Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* Edmund Jephcott, trans. (New York: Schocken, 1986), p. 333.

² See Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Human Series* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 239. The image is reproduced from Julia Blackburn's *The White Man: The First Responses of Aboriginal Peoples to the White Man* (London: Orbis, 1979). The photograph was taken by Herbert M. Cole in 1967 and published in *African Arts* in 1969.

³ Taussig, p. 240.

⁴ The exact date of release of Rouch's film is unclear. Completed in 1954, the film was released and withdrawn and re-released by Rouch with great frequency. For a history of the film's production and releases, see Paul Stoller, *The Cinematic Griot: The Ethnography of Jean Rouch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 145-160.

⁵ Taussig, p. 242.

⁶ For more on the relationship between Benjamin and Eisenstein's theories of montage see Taussig, pp. 28-29. See also William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Film* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993), pp. 32-57.

⁷ See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* Harry Zohn, trans. (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 253-264.

⁸ Taussig, p. 242.

⁹ For more on the "dialectical image" and anthropological inquiry, see Taussig, pp. 240-242. See also Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1989), for a brilliant and thoroughgoing analysis of Benjamin's notions of the "dialectical image" and *ur-histories*.

¹⁰ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine, 1969), pp. 167-168.

¹¹ Turner, p. 177.

franchised is planned and illusory. The structurally inferior can gain power within their structurally inferior group, but this power is on the margins of culture, reversed only during the proper calendrical period. Indeed, the structurally inferior exist as a group precisely because of their marginality. Turner summarizes the process in the following way: "[T]he masking of the weak in aggressive strength and the concomitant masking of the strong in humility and passivity are devices that cleanse society of its structurally engendered 'sins' and what hippies might call 'hang-ups.' The stage is then set for an ecstatic experience of *communitas*, followed by a sober return to a now purged and reanimated structure."¹² There are many similarities between this theoretical description of mimetic practice and the Hauka practice documented in Rouch's film. Yet, there are also some glaring differences, as shall be seen.

Rouch's film raises interesting questions about Turner's theory of mimesis. It is true that the Hauka possession ritual absolves the sins of the participants (indeed absolution is the first part of the practice itself), and the ritual also preserves the stability of the social structure, as Rouch points out in his final voice-over about the maintenance of Ghanaian sanity. For Turner, role reversal and mimesis are processes of social regeneration. Mimesis is part of a social structure's larger ritual pattern, and does not constitute an act of transgression or resistance on the part of the mimics. If the social structure (in Turner's sense) of Ghana were defined only in terms of the indigenous people of the area, then the cyclical pattern of status reversal and mimesis proposed by Turner could function. But, in the case of the Hauka possession ritual, the structurally superior group that is mimicked, and has its social position reversed (admittedly unwillingly), is an invader from the outside; it is a group that is not part of the local cultural practices. Therefore, instead of promoting social stability, mimetic practice promotes social instability and has a destabilizing effect on the colonial attempt to naturalize their hierarchy. The practitioners of the Hauka in Ghana understood all too well the latent meanings of the pomp and circumstance of the colonizers.

This reason, above all others, is why the practitioners were jailed. The practitioners of Hauka possession took the symbols of colonialist power and turned these representations of oppression into a liberating force. They did this by taking colonial symbols and making them "foreign," "incomprehensible," and "other" to the British themselves. The difference between the Hauka ritual, addressed in *Les Maitres fous*, and the examples given by Turner, is that all of Turner's examples (for instance, the Indian "Feast of Love") come from *within* one culture, not from the subjugation of one culture by another. It seems, then, that the recuperative power of mimicry takes hold if the reversal takes place within one social structure. When more than one culture is involved, and when it is not the structurally superior and the structurally inferior that are mimicked, but instead, the subjugated culture mimicking the imposed, subjugating culture, it is cultural instability that ensues, not recuperation. In the colonial world of the "old" world order, mimesis denaturalized a power system that seemed, most of the time to be utterly hegemonic.

In exploring the effects of colonialism on mimesis, and of the mimetic strategies adopted in the face of colonialism, Roger M. Keesing's work on mimetic power and political resistance in the Solomon islands offers some relevant avenues of inquiry.¹³ Keesing offers a strikingly different view of the power of mimesis. Carrying out his research amongst the Kwaio of the Solomon islands, Keesing is interested in questions of resistance and cultural autonomy. Tracing the history of the Kwaio people and their colonial subjugation, Keesing contends that part of the colonialist agenda was to place British cultural standards onto the culture they were invading, while concurrently labelling the cultures of the indigenous peoples as brute, savage, and uncivilized. Keesing writes that "[t]he ideological edifice and artifice on which British colonialism was built, in the Solomons and in other parts of the world, rested on the premise that a rule of law and order, rationally ordered accounting to the higher canons of 'civi-

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lization," was benevolently introduced to replace what had been uncivilized and anarchic and irrational."¹⁴ This system became naturalized, and the colonizers offered some of the indigenous people an emulative role to play in the new, official culture, setting up an elite within the colonized culture. This gave the indigenous people the paradoxical incentive to access power which kept them powerless. Some Solomon islanders became *simulated* officials:

Part of the process of colonial domination has been to instill in a stratum of the indigenous population simulacra of the manners, languages, styles, and values of the colonial elite. I say "simulacra" because the "natives" are permitted within certain bounds to emulate, one might say mimic, the ways of those who rule them; but always with a distance and deference that preserves the bounds of their subalternity.¹⁵

The power of colonialism, then, was two-fold: the British could maintain power by offering simulated or emulative power to indigenous people, and the British could also keep power over the members who did not accept this offer by branding them as brute, and "other," outside of the culture the British had imposed and created. Some of the people of the Solomon islands were complicit with the colonialist endeavour, became Christian, and took on the simulated position of power as part of the native elite. Others, members of the Kwaio for instance, remained "pagans" and were branded as such by their newly colonized compatriots. The Kwaio, instead of choosing the sanctified, simulated, mimetic patterns endorsed by the structurally superior British, developed their own oppositional strategies through the use of mimesis. This took mimesis out of the realm of sanctified ritual and placed it in the domain of oppositional politics, as Keesing notes: "[t]o emulate without this deference, to presume equality, was *transgression*, a challenge to white supremacy and colonial domination."¹⁶

The question the Kwaio were faced with was: which type of strategy of resistance would work against the colonialist power? Keesing argues that the power of non-sanctifying mimesis was the strongest resistance that the Kwaio had. He believes this for two reasons: (1) They could demystify the cultural systems of the British, and in doing so; (2) they could fight the British with their own forms of communal and cultural exchange. Keesing writes that the Kwaio demystified British symbols of power

and civilization in the following way: "Kwaio appropriations of the categories, logics, and semiology of colonial rule progressively stripped away the mystifications of this ideology by portraying the colonial presence as what it was: an act of invasion, an appropriation of lands, an imposition of an alien cultural system, a rule by force and not by law—since the British did not follow their own laws and moral codes—or by consent."¹⁷ This process of demystification to some extent denaturalized the British system. Furthermore, transgressive mimesis worked as a means of appropriating the British system and making it work to the Kwaio's own ends: "If one wants to challenge colonial assertions of sovereignty, one must do it in a language of flags and ancestors-on-coins in place of Kings. [. . .] A recognition that if counterclaims are to be recognized and effective, they must be cast in the terms and categories and semiology of hegemonic discourse, is politically astute, not blindly reactive."¹⁸ Unlike Audre Lorde's oft-quoted statement that one cannot dismantle the master's house with his own tools, Keesing is proposing that not only can this be done, but in the process of mimetic appropriation, indigenous people can transform the systems of power and make them, to some extent, their own. Keesing concludes by stating:

All this is to say that the reactive process is a highly complex dialectical one in which the categorical structures of domination may be negated or inverted—hence doubly subverted—as well as reproduced in opposition. Even when they appear to be appropriating the structures and categories and logics of colonial discourse, subaltern peoples progressively but ultimately radically transform them, in the very process of transgression and in their deployment in a counterhegemonic political struggle.¹⁹

¹² Turner, p. 185.

¹³ Roger M. Keesing, *Custom and Confrontation: The Kwaio Struggle for Cultural Autonomy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Keesing, p. 228.

¹⁵ Keesing, p. 230.

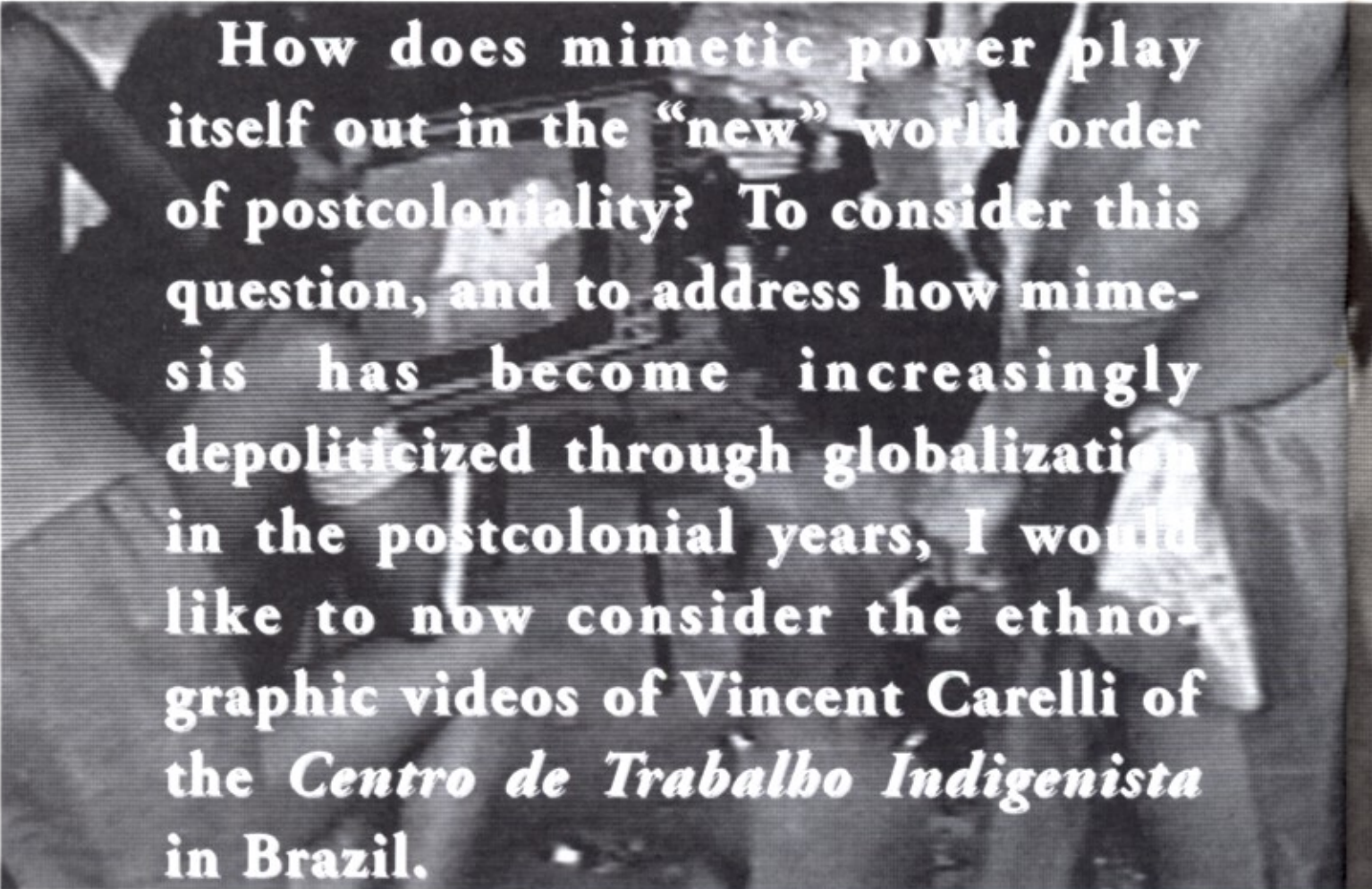
¹⁶ Keesing, p. 230.

¹⁷ Keesing, p. 229.

¹⁸ Keesing, pp. 236-237.

¹⁹ Keesing, p. 238.

Mimetic power that is not sanctioned by the structurally superior can bring about violent conflict and drastic change within a culture; it is not part of the social structure itself, and that is where its power lies. What Keesing points to here is that the clash of cultures, where one culture appropriates the other and uses its naturalized systems against it, can lead to denaturalization of the "inherent" rights to power held by the colonialists; this has the potentiality of leading to a dramatic shift in power. Finally, Keesing's argument points to the fact that mimetic power is not always recuperative.



How does mimetic power play itself out in the "new" world order of postcoloniality? To consider this question, and to address how mimesis has become increasingly depoliticized through globalization in the postcolonial years, I would like to now consider the ethnographic videos of Vincent Carelli of the *Centro de Trabalho Indigenista* in Brazil.

Carelli's videos inadvertently address mimetic power in colonized cultures in the postcolonial world. I use the term "inadvertently" for the simple reason that unlike Rouch's *Les Maitres fous*, the following videos presume to address the positive cultural aspects of the advent of video technology in indigenous culture; the camera is of central importance. Yet, it seems that the presence of this equipment brings about a far more complex set of problems than can be done justice to with a simple argument that posits that getting technology into the hands of the people is *a priori* a positive political goal. In Carelli's videos, the video camera becomes the instigator of the mimetic ritual. One is left with the question of whether or not the mimetic actions evoked in these videos come from inside or outside the culture being documented, or if the production of these videos instigates a strange amalgamation of the "outside" and the "inside"; the video itself becoming the mimetic ritual.

In *Video in the Villages* (1989), *The Spirit of T.V.* (1990), and *Meeting Ancestors: the Zo'e* (1993), Vincent Carelli documents the Waiãpi Indians documentation of themselves, for themselves, on video. Carelli, with the help of the Brazilian government, undertook this project in order to set up an archive of the traditions, cul-

tures, and images on the Indian inhabitants of the Brazilian Rain Forests.²⁰ It is important to note that these videos are *not* the ones that the Waiãpi keep as a document of themselves, but are made by Carelli for a western audience. The footage is kept by the Waiãpi, but it is not edited into the concise formats that are distributed in North America. These versions are made in order to raise funds and keep grant agencies happy; Carelli contends that there are no political effects generated by these videos whatsoever. Furthermore, he contends that it is impossible for video images to politicize viewers.²¹ This strikes me as an overly naive view as to the political



import of images. After all, if images were so ineffectual, why would the Waiãpi's self-documentation seem like an important endeavour for Carelli?

These videos (both Carelli's "western" versions and the self-documentation), produced a strange effect within the Waiãpi culture. The Waiãpi began to mimic their imaginary view of their past traditions, in order to produce a "true" document of their past; this is taken to its extreme in *Meeting Ancestors: The Zo'e*, where Chief Wai-Wai visits an "untouched" tribe in a search for mythic origins. *Video in the Villages*, the first video in the series, documents an eerie cultural effect: the Waiãpi videotape images of themselves performing a traditional dance ritual, and then, when they see the images played back, restage their ritual performance, in order to make it look more "savage" and "Indian." To achieve this effect, they add more body paint and remove their western clothes. Yet, in the process, they cease to document their culture *as it exists*, and begin to engage in a mimetic ritual, although unlike the Hauka or the transgressive mimetic practices of the Kwaio, the Waiãpi mimic their imaginary view of themselves. This imaginary view is as much a western one as it is an Indian one.



The Waiāpi restage their traditional performance, mimicking their imaginary view of what "savagene-ness" is.²² This imaginary view of savagene-ness corresponds to what they imagine the western viewer will deem to be "savage-looking." In a sense, they are colonizing their own image, in order to retrieve what they believe has disappeared from their rituals because of colonization. In this video, the Waiāpi also revive a piercing ceremony that has not been practiced in twenty years. Ron Burnett cites the voice-over, scripted by Carelli, as the Waiāpi "rein-vent" piercing, as evidence that the videomaker believed he was capturing an historical moment: "We never imagined that the video would be a cata-lyst for nose piercing ceremonies which had not been done for twenty years."²³ Both the example of the restaged savagene-ness and of the body piercing raise questions about mimetic power. What is the relationship between these images and the culture that is under self-reconstruction? Patricia Aufderheide, a proponent of the video project, believes that it grants the Waiāpi their autonomy: "Using video reinforced an emerging concept of 'traditional' in contrast to Brazilian culture—a concept that had not, apparently been part of [. . . the culture's] repertoire before contact but that had practical political utility."²⁴ This strikes me as highly problematic. If "traditional" did not exist as a category in the Waiāpi's culture prior to the presence of the video cameras, then where did this concept come from? In this postcolonial video world, what is authentic and what is a simulated reconstruction of an idealized past? Through the presence of video technology, the Waiāpi are engaging in a mimetic process, where they are both reconstructing the myths of the past, and adjusting their own self-image (that of "savagene-ness") to conform to what their imaginary ideal of Indian existence is. It is important to note that they are not documenting their own culture, but recreating it through video. The question, of course, is why?

In *The Spirit of T.V.*, Chief Wai-Wai, the head of the Waiāpi, who is also the head story-teller who preserves the group's history from generation to generation, is happy to have the Waiāpi's stories on tape, as it preserves them for all time; at the same time, it strips away the need of him and of the oral tradition he keeps alive. Getting one's history from a videotape is not the same as having it passed on through an interactive oral tradition. These recon-structions of ritual change the nature of their sym-bolic functions within the community, as the ritual

dance and body-piercing no longer reflect or demonstrate communal bonding, or even what takes place within the community; instead they are the Waiāpi's mimetic representation of themselves, as much for imagined others as for themselves. The images are directed, as the people in the video state, at other Indian tribes and are also supposed to scare western viewers with their savagene-ness. So, in *Video in the Villages*, *The Spirit of T.V.* and *Meeting Ancestors: The Zo'é*, the past and present and imagi-nary image of the future are all fused into the video image. The question which remains is how will the culture survive when image production is funda-mentally changing the culture itself? While in *Les Maîtres fous* this fusing of the colonizer and the colo-nized raises questions about the naturalized existence of the colonialist power, in Carelli's videos, the tapes themselves question the future existence of the cul-ture, even though the tapes are supposed to preserve the exact culture they are changing. Furthermore, the mimetic faculty, which is traditionally used by the oppressed, the marginalized, the structurally inferior, to seize power from the oppressor, is now used by the oppressed to mimic their own represen-tations, creating in the process a highly bizarre *dop-pelgänger* effect.

What do these different examples demonstrate about mimetic power? It seems to me that the tradi-tional role of the mimetic faculty in colonial cultures was to function as a destabilizing force. When true mimetic power falls into the hands of the structural-ly inferior, as is the case with the Hauka ritual and the transgressive mimesis of the Kwaio, instability and the possibility of a profound shift in the social structure ensues. But for this oppositional political stance to emerge, there must be an audience for the

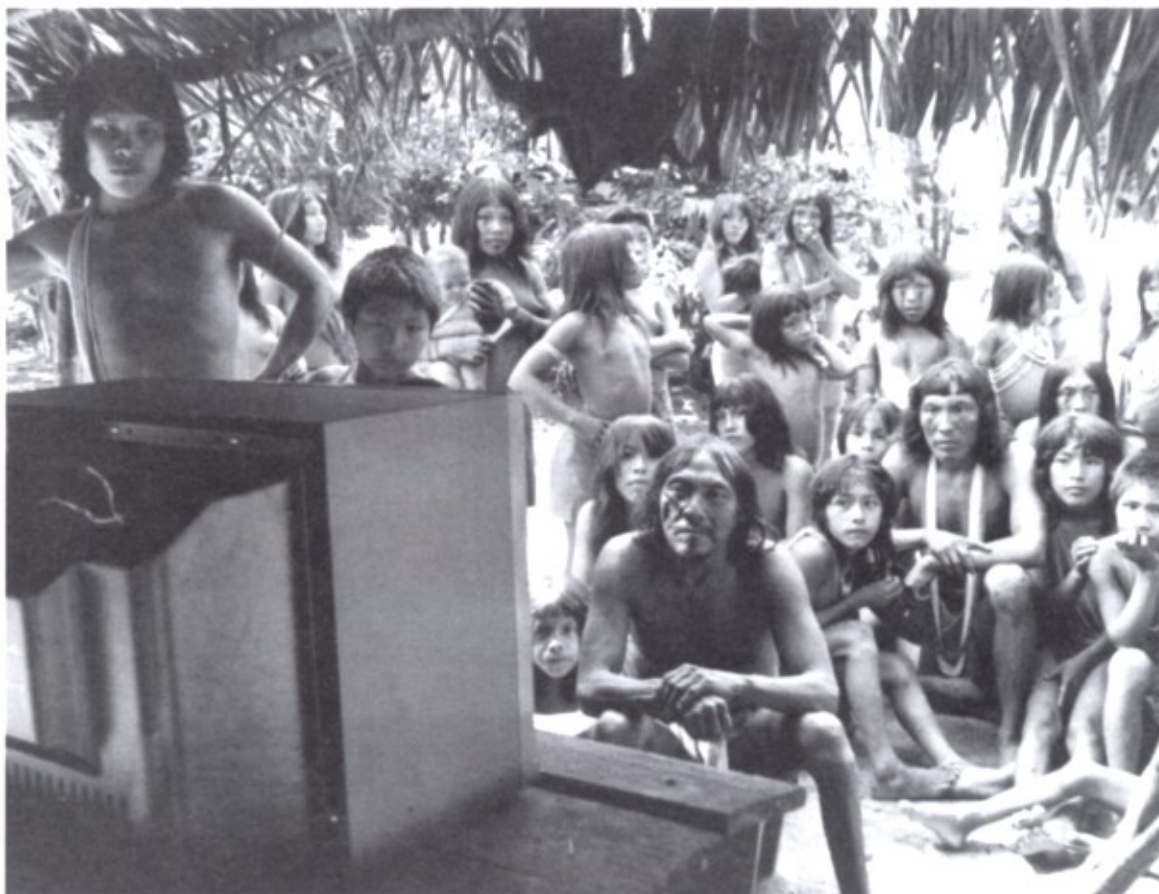
²⁰ For an overview of the "Video in the Villages" project, see Vincent Carelli and Dominique T. Gallois, "Video dans les vil-lages: l'expérience Waiāpi" *Lumière* 32 (1992), pp. 41-51. Translated as "Video in the Villages: The Waiāpi Experience" in Francine Roy, ed. *Amerindians in View* (Montreal: Video Tiers-monde, 1993), pp. 5-12.

²¹ Carelli made these points at a screening of his works at the *Cinéma Parallèle* in Montreal, on November 12, 1993.

²² For more on the effect of the western construction of savage-ness on Indian self-identity, see Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 317-319.

²³ Ron Burnett, "The Video Public" in Janine Marchessault, ed. *Video in the Age of Identity: History, Aesthetics, Politics* (forthcom-ing, 1994).

²⁴ Patricia Aufderheide, "Latin American Grassroots Television: Beyond Video" *Public Culture* 5,3 (1993), pp. 579-592.



mimetic act, even if that audience (in the case of the Kwaio and the Ghanaians, the British) do not particularly wish to see the performance. In the case of the Waiãpi, it seems that they have turned the mimetic faculty back onto themselves, mimicking their past, in order to regain a symbolic power they once seemed to have when their historical traditions were strong. Yet, it seems that the production of the videos themselves diffuses this power, as the mimetic act supersedes the desire to accurately document culture. Yet, paradoxically, the videos represents themselves as the true document of their culture. Furthermore, the mimetic image becomes a patronizing one in the west, as the discourse which often surrounds these videos is one of condescending paternalism. By this I mean that Carelli and others believe that their presence with video cameras has somehow instigated the retrieval of tradition, whereas it strikes me that, in the case of the Waiãpi, the power of mimesis is to supplant the ability of the culture to document itself. In the "new" world order of globalization and assimilation, all that seems to remain in these videos is a simulacra of a mythical past.

My thanks to Ron Burnett, Charles Levin, Paisley Livingston, and Judy Whitehead for their comments on earlier versions of this article, to Haidee Wason and Chandrabhanu Pattanayak for sharing their insights on Carelli's videos, and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their financial support.

Visual Credits:

p 12: "White man from the ground" (Bekee ime ala). Image from an Igbo mbari shrine house. Photograph by Herber M. Cole, 1967, (illustrated in Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*); **p 13:** The statue of the Governor-General in Moukaiba's compound, *Les maitre fous*. J. Rouch, Comité du Film Ethnographique (illustrated in Paul Stoller's *The Cinematic Grot: The Ethnography of Jean Rouch*); **p 18, 19, 20:** *L'Espirt De La Tele*, Vincent Carelli, 1990; **above:** Video mas Aldu'as, Centro de Trabalho Indigenista. Photograph by Vincent Carelli.



Prelude to a Kiss Norman René 1992

...EVEN AS ALSO I AM KNOWN VICARIOUS MISCEGENATION ON POSTCOLONIAL SCREENS

By DIANE SIPPL

BROKERS OF DESIRE AND FIELDS OF PLAY

All desire bears its histories, the desires of the exploited and the repressed no less than the desires of those who exploit and repress. But differently in each case... (In) Western culture the 'tragic vision' has been one of the most powerful means of containing and sublimating desire. But never completely: in turning back upon his or her own desire the deviant knows how to read the history within it. Included there is a history of heterosexuality hardly known to itself. Jonathan Dollimore *Sexual Dissidence* 1991

Some of us have begun to ask whether an orthodoxy of upholding difference has generated a new scale of indifference. A nostalgic and idealizing celebration of cultural and sexual difference does little to facilitate an understanding that allows us to cohabit the historical divides in which we live. These divides have led us to dwell upon the reconstitution of our identities. But as long as identity is *defined* (in terms of what is "normal") rather than *described* (relative to what constitutes it), repression will remain its inherent property. That repression gains both a menacing and a comforting release through the play of the vicarious....

We cannot overlook the fact that some very explicit mutually exclusive, oppositional, and hierarchical categories for race, gender, and sexuality entered into their most powerful configurations at the moment that the cinema became a popular pastime with mass appeal. The films examined here afford us the opportunity to recognize the distinction between the cinema's seemingly ahistorical titillation through voyeurism and the full play of the vicarious game on our screens. If the 19th century ended with the height of imperialism, the 20th is ending in its depths, bringing us face-to-face with the costs and losses of empire. In many ways this *is* the history of popular cinema, and our projections of miscegenation, in the space between the spectator and the peephole, are only beginning to come to light. To what extent have we refused our phantoms a field of play, perverting both the possibilities of the cinema and the capacities of the spectator to engage difference through the power of the vicarious? Discovering and valuing the prospect of "eroticizing the social" (as opposed to merely "liberating the sexual") in our relations with each other, we may also come to appreciate different ways of looking — at films, at the world, and at the interpersonal screens we construct.

A.W.O.L. Spirits: A Prelude

Must o' been my kiss, is all I can think — It drives men wild.
The Strange Man as Rita

Sad to say — I'm on my way. Won't be back for many a day. My heart is down, My head is turning around, I had to leave a pretty girl In Kingston town.
The Kingston Trio

In *Prelude to a Kiss* (1992), through a moment of fantastic gimmickry that is hardly a departure from the codes of conventional Hollywood realism — not only visually, but especially as the narrative plays itself out — a bride's body is invaded by a strange man who would like to extend his life: the stranger loses control of his repressed wish and his spirit goes A.W.O.L. from his body. It is particularly a young and beautiful woman in her moment of glory, her wedding day, who catches his eye, and it is these particulars, and not the electrifying kiss, that are significant, for they are the filmic means by which the script invests the bride, Rita, with an irritating ambivalence. Whether we are looking at the female body/male spirit or the male body/female spirit, s/he is a screen for the projections of both the stranger's wish and the husband's fear, both the old man's vicarious re-birth and the young man's denial and rejection of his new companion.

Since the stranger's days are numbered and his options limited, he enjoys the liberty of going "over the wall" from his body and living out another person's role. But the problem with the kiss is that it leaves another body behind, and quite present, with an effect dissatisfying to the husband, Peter: because it is a male body, figuratively it stands between Peter and the spirit of his wife, and also between Peter and the flesh of his wife; plot-wise, it destroys a happy marriage; and symbolically, the stranger who is a wedding-crasher and a home-wrecker is cast as a social deviant.

Given the narrative as it is resolved, if *Prelude to a Kiss* can win one point — it's the soul that makes the "man" (Rita's spirit in the stranger's body) — the film loses ground with the other — it's the woman that makes the bond (with a husband). For the man who inhabits Rita's body wants the emotional rewards of congenital procreation. It's not incidental that these are the very same needs Peter has voiced to Rita as his fiancée; still, whether the stranger would prefer to fulfill them as a man or as a woman becomes a moot question, once he has appropriated Rita's relatively younger body to do so, and he does so because his and Peter's masculine visions of the world see women in only two roles — as sexual servants and as mothers. The subsequent problem: an excess soul. If the stranger fulfills his quest as a man, Rita becomes literally his sex object; if as a woman, Rita's heart and mind are dispensable.

Appropriately the designated playground for such an experiment, exoticized Jamaica, lacking Long Island iced teas, signifies disaster and doom for all three parties. The

grass is not greener on the "other" side, and the farce ends right there. One could say the stranger had no ill intentions, but even so the overall proposition is given no field of play. In this case the elderly, ill, desiring stranger, granted no wisdom and no voice of his own, is nothing but a hapless intruder regarded with contempt. With its lack of ideological imagination, the film exploits the very age-ism, misogyny, and homophobia that we expect it to explore: it perverts — that is, contradicts and disposes of — the very proposition of imagining alternative bases of love.

In *Prelude to a Kiss*, though the stranger inhabits a woman on her honeymoon, he trespasses the boundaries of neither gender nor sexuality; the body exchange is portrayed as a physical accident and nothing more. In this sense the film is more than a disappointment; it is a betrayal, because it rejects the capacity of the spectator to grapple with the complexities of human difference that such an accident, even on simply a physical level, would engender. There is a telling line in the film that can be taken as a commentary on *Prelude to a Kiss*: "You're doing it again. You take a perfect situation and pee all over it."

In the next film we take up we shall see the prospect of cross-habitation within the same gender, sexuality, and race. Visually that film proceeds along the premise that seeing is believing, while thematically it engages precisely the subject matter of vicarious desire. But the vicarious imagination is engaged on another level as well, and it is within this domain — the spectator's active relation to cultural myths — that miscegenation enters into the film.

I F B E E S A R E F E W Body Invaders and Soul Transfusions

*To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee
One clover, and a bee, And revery. The revery
alone will do. If bees are few.*

Emily Dickinson, 1896

At least since the making of *Birth of a Nation* (1915), Hollywood cinema has posed the body as representing someone other than the person who inhabits it, be it a "black" person acting "white" (played by a white actor in blackface) or a Klansman in concealing/signifying masquerade. Recent films such as *Sommersby* (1993) prolong the tradition in classical Hollywood realism of the need to disclose the disguise. Just as Jack Sommersby needs to name the names of the local nightriders, we seek to certify Jack, since the narrative structures the ambiguity of his identity as the central and resolvable conflict of the film. The question seems straightforward: Does he walk in another man's shoes? Answer: If the shoe fits, wear it. But the shoe is two sizes too big. Jack's solution: wear it anyway. Thus *Sommersby* plays on the ambivalence between two oppositional mind-sets — both the wish for and the reluctance to accept difference, both the suspicion as to whether someone can become the person we want and the wishful thinking that prevents us from believing other-wise.



Sommersby Jon Amiel 1993

Who Is Jack Sommersby? The Construction of Identity

I knew from the first moment I saw you it was always you I loved.
Laurel Sommersby

*... And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.
With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience,
you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.*
C. P. Cavafy "Ithaca", 1911

Sommersby is an adaptation of a French film, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, which is in turn the narrative of a real-life court case concerning a peasant family in the 16th-century Pyrenees Mountains; but *Sommersby* is also an adaptation of the final segment of an even older "coming home" story. Jack has carried Homer with him over the years: while it's *The Iliad* he reads aloud, it's *The Odyssey* he faces; although war lingers in the film's background, reconciliation occupies the foreground. And with Laurel as his Penelope and Vine Hill his Ithaca, our "Odysseus" may be home, but his journey still takes precedence. This is because it is the journey itself with which Jack invests his life, and which becomes the central theme of the narrative; furthermore, it's not simply Jack's journey that is at stake, for it becomes that of every citizen of Vine Hill. Its course is the construction of a new identity — the birth of the New South. So the Jack we see is *neither* the "old" Sommersby *nor* his cell mate. Rather, incubated by familiarity with an ugly "twin" in prison, Jack is re-born as a Rainmaker who gently inculcates his aspirations and values in nearly everyone he touches. Can the man Laurel loves be both hopeful, giving, inspiring of trust *but also* "wild," "different," "a little dangerous," as she suggests to Jack?

A Very Close Shave: If This Isn't Love

A few strokes more and the colonel could be released with a very close shave — how close he would never know! — or, one stroke, properly directed, and he would never stand erect again!

Charles Waddell Chesnutt,
"The Doll" in *The Crisis*, 1912

Yet each man kills the thing he loves. By each let this be heard. Some do it with a bitter look, Some with a flattering word. The coward does it with a kiss, The brave man with a sword!

Oscar Wilde
The Ballad of Reading Gaol, 1898

In two significant scenes in the film Jack places his identity in Laurel's hands: in the first, with him in the barber's chair, it's to save his life; in the second, with her on the witness stand, it's to save his love. Likewise, in the first scene Laurel defends her person; in the second, she defends her heart. Both of these high-pitched sequences juxtapose not only desire with danger, but intense intimate affection with vulnerability to loss, for as surely as Jack succeeds in seducing Laurel, he places himself into the noose of the hangman. But Jack's noose is not at all like Christ's cross, because Jack is not like Christ: he is no "innocent," and it is his *redemption*, not his sacrifice, that becomes the people's salvation. Furthermore their salvation is now, in 1860's Tennessee, and not in life after death; it's the sale of their tobacco crop that is their jubilee, their "Come-and-Get-It Day." For this reason the townspeople oppose his arraignment, but ironically it is Jack's acquittal in Laurel's eyes that ends his life.

In an early scene in the film Laurel steps out of her hoop and corset and tucks away her ruby brooch (her own inherited "small fortune") once she has shown her estranged husband to his own room for the night. His sudden appearance from behind a curtain in her private chambers frightens her and she cringes. At that moment her face betrays a deep-rooted defense mechanism that she demonstrates much more precisely with her cut-throat at his neck in the next shot, when he attempts to caress her hips through her petticoat. That tenderness meets with a good measure of resistance on Laurel's part, for the Jack who left her hadn't been the "least... little... bit... kind...."

After months of Jack's wooing of his wife, the dramatic ambivalence of the "close shave" is culminated in the courtroom scene in which Jack solicits and badgers Laurel as the key witness in his trial. In violation of her modesty as a Victorian "lady" before the public and the law, he strips her bare regarding her emotions, desires, romantic liaisons with Orin and sexual behaviors with himself. His heart-felt aggression reaches another dimension as he corners her into an open confession of her passion for her "partner in crime," the cross-examiner posed

before her, the man we know and see as Jack Sommersby. Haven't we more here than a husband's harassment? In fact we witness the rape of a suitor, and it is only in Orin's eyes and our own — in our privileged spectator point of view, not those of the town, the jury, or the Judge — that Jack rapes Laurel, in the midst of this court of law. By the very act of forcing upon her their conjugal bond, he commits a rape: a rape of love. And it is not for the rape, but for the love, that he will be punished, in the same richly symbolic way that any black man in the country was subjected to "retaliation" for "inappropriate affiliation" with a white woman.

A Hero Tells No Lies: A Fine Shade of Difference

Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore I will deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him. With long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation.

Psalm 91:14-16

It's important that however inadvertent — and in fact, self-destructive — is the outcome of Jack's courtroom confrontation with Laurel, and however clearly the film's text positions him as the scapegoat for the men he successfully identifies as riding with the Klan, the powerful ambivalence of the imagery in the film's subtext invites a reading of Jack's sentence as deserved punishment for "transgression." In the film's narrative the man on trial for breaking the law is Jack Sommersby, and it is he who is not only a murderer, but a "wild," brutish, dangerous enemy of the people. But the mythology of the culture holds the black man as the perpetrator of uncontrollable animal instincts upon the defenseless white woman.

The defendant could escape his indictment, but instead he upholds his name. What's interesting is that he never perjures himself to do this. He doesn't *say* he's Jack Sommersby; he says he's *Laurel's husband*. The fine shade of difference is between entitlement and function, contract and proof, or, metaphorically, inheritance and labor — the Old South and the New South. In fact Jack believes (in) himself. When he and Laurel share a private moment in his prison cell, he asks her, "You really wanna know who I am? You sure?" And he whispers sheepishly into her face, "I'm... Jack Sommersby! Pleased to meet you!" She laughs in joy, but leaves enraged. "What did I do *wrong*?" he pleads, and he insists that it's Horace Townsend he buried. He's right.

His last request of Laurel is that she tie the knot around his neck for their unusual crime of passion: "Be there with me and I can do this thing right..." he begs of her. And in a resolution appropriate to any good melodrama, she abides. Her public proclamation, "I'm here, Jack, *I'm here!*" is the perfect seal of his symbolic fate. For



Sommersby Jon Amiel 1993

to our spectators' ears, it could as easily be the voice of Hester Prynne to the devil — or of Laurel Sommersby to the (mythical) relentlessly virile black male antagonist. The disarming close-up of a white hood replacing Jack's face on our screen serves as well to evoke the faceless black male bodies hanging from the limbs of trees in the film's establishing shots, or the community KKK members who seek vengeance upon this folk hero, as it does to represent Jack in his last moment of life.

In fact the visual text exaggerates the shared "whiteness" of Jack and Laurel as two culprits of desire in a love-making scene in which the lighting, camera angle, and composition within the frame emphasize every element of

the flesh they have in common, down to the number of freckles and moles upon their fair skin. But it's through his *non-sexual* actions — the vicarious miscegenation with which he is inscribed — that Jack achieves what has been feared in the outcome of *actual* miscegenation: a dissemination of power across color lines with severe ramifications in gender and class relations as well. Jack's commitment to Laurel and the community in the film's text renews our faith in the potential for individual growth; in the film's subtext, in which Jack is positioned as a black male, his bond of love with Laurel challenges constructions of race and gender. However this challenge is posed at the expense of the visibility of the racial other.

From Gender-Bending to Whitewashed Lynching

During the slave regime the southern white man owned the Negro, body and soul. It was to his interest to dwarf the soul and preserve the body. The slave was rarely killed. He was too valuable. But emancipation came, and the vested interests of the white man in the Negro's body were lost. With freedom a new system of intimidation came into vogue: the Negro was not only whipped and scourged, he was killed.

Ida B. Wells

Southern Horrors: Lynch Law In All Its Phases 1892

8 Negroes Lynched Since Last Issue of The Free Speech

3 Charged with Murdering White Men; 5 with Raping White Women

Nobody in this section believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men assault white women. If southern white men are not more careful they will overreach themselves, and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.

Ida B. Wells
The Free Speech
1891

Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul.

..Psalm 69:1

Certainly the film does provide black male characters, particularly Joseph and the Judge. Joseph, a freed slave, is portrayed as unassuming, hard-working, and a bit skeptical at best, but primarily as a token of the changing economy of the South. The Judge, massive in both weight and might, is a successful device for shock value and a vehicle for the local folk wisdom ("Let's get our cows over their buckets..."). The "usual crime" of the era, for which Orin and the Knights of the White Camelia would have punished Joseph whether he had participated in it or not, is conveniently missing from the film's text; with the alibi of that unmentionable offense Joseph would have been lynched, and there would have been little that any Judge — black or white — could have done to stop it.

As we witness the re-birth of Jack Sommersby, it's never a matter of infusion with a pre-existing soul of divine origin (certainly not Jack Sommersby's), but of Jack (re-)making his own soul and fashioning it in relation to the needs of others. That's the text. But the film's subtext infuses Jack with attributes of both gender and race "other" than his own: it feminizes him but also "darkens" him. It's as if Jack, land-holding heir to his father's plan-

tation, is baptized with the waters of oppression. Because he chooses to "side" with the former slaves (there being only two positions to take vis-à-vis a person of color within the code of the Old South, to say nothing of the New), he "drinks of their water," and for such "contamination" he pays a price. Becoming *like* them he must *hang* like them, or *for* them — because of them if not in their behalf. Thus in the subtext it's not Jack's past as an abusive drunkard and gun-slinging gambler — *whoever* he is, Sommersby or an impostor — that pegs him as a wild and dangerous "animal," but his affiliation and empathy with the "wounded" (explicitly the former slave Joseph); he is guilty by association. If the primary images of the post-bellum South are lynching and rape, one as conspicuously present as the other is absent, then Jack Sommersby embodies them both as a metaphor for the black male that is keenly honed by KKK member Orin, his jealous rival.

It's important to recognize that the Jack Sommersby of the subtext *is mythical*, and that he can only be perceived as worthy of lynching by a process of color infusion that is itself the residue of cultural displacement, since the very alibi of lynching rested upon the fear and denial within the white perpetrator. But there is a textual element that enhances the opportunity for a racist projection upon Jack as a screen: the Jack Sommersby we see in Laurel's household is a feminized male by 1860's standards. It is he we see reading to the son at night, comforting him in times of fear, assuming the task of the child's moral upbringing. Jack fathers this son the way any good *mother* did in the 1860's (and *might* in the 1990's). Furthermore this apt angel at the hearth manages to flee from a life-threatening fist fight to his wife's side at her moment of childbirth — to *crawl into her bed*, no less, to cradle his newborn baby *girl*. Even in his one moment of drunkenness as the "new" Jack, Laurel's suspicions of him provoke the antithesis of his "old" masculine behavior mode: "I'm not leaving again. I'm *home* now..." His relative disempowerment along gender lines within the era of the text aligns him race- and class-wise with his constituency in Vine Hill.

Jack's life as we discover it is contingent upon his identification with those at-loss, and this is not simply a matter of "saving face" but of "saving *name*," only because he claims that without "his" name, he hasn't got a *life*. The irony is that as the film opens, that name, owing to past behavior, is mud except for what Jack can *make* of it. But let's consider all that's contingent upon his possession of the name he makes. Jack pleads with Laurel on the witness stand to nourish his seed: stolen waters are sweet but still waters run deep, and his name surely delivers his daughter Rachel from "illegitimacy" and Laurel from the "sin" of living with a lover (who is also a liar, a thief, and a deserter). What's more Jack's name, once carrying the connotation of ownership, now becomes the means by which he disseminates the family's (historical) wealth. Jack's seed — not just burley but also faith — allows him to propagate productivity on a soil depleted by cotton planters in a region where nearly everyone who hasn't

been killed in the war is ready to leave. By Jack's successful wager on tobacco, poor farmers, sharecroppers, and freed slaves are now invited to buy the Sommersby land and to live by the fruits of their own cooperative labor.

While in history the planters were replaced by bosses, the premise of collective labor is fulfilled in the film: the screen is resplendent with the planting, fertilizing, and harvesting of the first Tennessee tobacco, which brings Vine Hill \$10,000 cash for the crop. What's interesting for our purposes is the symbolic level on which Jack wages the private war by which he becomes a public hero, for this war is none but the Civil War at its political, economic, and emotional core.

In the end it's the ambivalence of Jack's 1860's identity — not between Jack and Horace but between the planter and the poor farmer, the "white" and the "black" man, the "male" and the "female" man — that speaks to a transitional audience in the 1990's. As regressive spectators we can play the game of Hangman and find a vicarious thrill in lynching him, not for the murder Jack never committed but for his out-of-bounds behavior with regard to race, class and gender, his "miscegenation" with Laurel. As liberal humanists we can weep, purging ourselves of emotional anxiety surrounding issues of race and displacing that unrest onto issues of the personal fulfillment of the "self-made man." Still others of us can experience a gratifying identification with characters in the film's text who are able to re-position their marginalities as a center of social, economic, and interpersonal strength in a new era.

Jack's identity is one hinge upon which these spectator positions swing, but there is another, and that is the politics of desire. Regarding matters of the heart, for Laurel to deny Jack his name is to profess her love; but as we have seen, that pronouncement is laden with social responsibilities. So Laurel's public, perjuring abidance by Jack's false identity — her acceptance of him as an impostor — kills him but opens doors for the spectator. Disguise is upheld in *Sommersby*. If Jack has a secret, so does Laurel, and it becomes a worthwhile game for us to try to find it out, for in playing that game we can discover a lie that bears a truth: the power of the mask, of complicity with disguise in transgression. Now we shall turn to a contemporary illustration of "spiritual" border-crossing in which the appropriate body becomes an expressway to the soul of a lost love.

S O U L A S
" S O U L "

A Medium Is a Medium Is a Medium

Give up the ghost, Sam! Oda Mae Brown

In *Ghost* (1990) Oda Mae Brown, a disenfranchised African-American woman from Brooklyn, is inscribed with magical inter- and inner-personal powers in lieu of social, economic, and political credibility. In every functional way she can connive, she struts a false identity: as a

citizen, as a soul "sister" in the neighborhood, and even as a seancier, she is a fraud. But she's a fake who finds out she's *real* in a most supernatural way. As a conductor of spirits she's no joke, and she is taken to task by Sam, recently deceased, in a desperate plea to commune with his girlfriend, Molly.

In her favorite lucrative pastime, Oda Mae plays the crystal-ball game, trafficking in dreams. She's a convener between people's wishes and their own imaginative powers. We might say that Oda Mae is able to pull off what Jack Sommersby feeds into and stakes his life on — the will to believe. Neither Molly nor Oda Mae, for that matter, believes in life after death, but it's fair to say that both subscribe to a faith in inter-worldly matchmaking. Sam, the "Ditto" man, has never managed in life to say "I love you," and the film's suspense rests on this unrequited vocabulary. Of course there is the crime plot for action and distraction, but the most significant scene in resolving the conflict of the narrative is a dance of love between Sam and Molly facilitated by the off-screen body of Oda Mae. We might surmise that Oda Mae doesn't even need to be present to serve as a filmic and psycho-social screen.

What complicates matters as far as the purpose of this discussion is concerned is that the scene begins and ends with Oda Mae's visible body and audible voice. "Okay, you can *use* me. Use my body. Just do it quick before I change my mind," says the con-artist in all sincerity. And in a simple feat of style the camera frames a close-up of her black hands with painted red fingernails embracing Molly's white sculptor's hands in a substantiation of a previous shot in the initial love scene between Molly and Sam in which the action of modeling clay dissolves emotionally into fondling flesh. With the audio (dis)continuity device of Sam's voice-over in the mode of heavy breathing, the film cuts from this visual interracial, same-sex embrace to a close-up of Molly, eyes closed and mouth open, as she dances, mesmerized — not with Oda Mae, who has vanished, but with Sam, in our point of view (and Molly's, we presume) with all the tangible evidence of his body. The ghost, while invisible to Molly because she *doesn't look*, is conspicuously present for us, and Sam's body behaves as lovingly as ever it has, before Molly's closed eyes. When Sam's rival appears and interrupts the trance, a quick instance of animation allows Oda Mae to fling Sam from her body and fly the coop with Molly, leaving Sam to perform with extra-terrestrial macho prowess in defense of the ladies and in aggression against his drug-dealing enemy. Sam, by the way, has sought out a subway *dybbuk* to teach him the combat skills to conduct his unfinished business with those who took him before his time. More important, this under-world master of displaced torment teaches Sam to "move" on his inner feelings.

But for the moment let's not lose sight of what resides in the afterimage of hands — reaching, stroking, caressing each other across the confines of race, class, gender (since Oda Mae is a *female* mediator for Sam) and therefore even, visually speaking, sexuality. Where is Oda

Mae when Sam "uses her body" to transmit his feelings? Does she channel any desires of her own? Or is she merely a screen for his ghostly projections, "shadows dancing in the light" in minstrel-like fashion? If so, the (19)90's version of this theater stages a release of the repressed without fear of its return, for consider the consequences of discovering that you're *real* only in your role as a *medium* for others, especially when one of *them* is merely a *ghost*! In this configuration the "spook" is not (as it should be) the historical image of the Christian secret society member riding at night in a white sheet (who was, paradoxically, the same spectator cheering at both the burnt-cork face and the flaming lynched body), but his scapegoat. In its climactic moment, the film's ghost is Oda Mae.

If Oda Mae forfeits her body, counterfeit as it is — Molly says there's a police file on her (disguises) "at least ten inches thick" — in both the narrative and the *mise en scène* at this "high" point in the film, then during the dance itself her offering, a human (self-) sacrifice, is transubstantiation as a restoration of shared life. As a saving grace, by virtue of its schematization and visualization if not by its casting of street-wise Whoopi Goldberg as Oda Mae, the film strives to endow its romantic couple and its spectators with a "soul transfusion." Oda Mae herself uncannily utters the word in the bank ("I need to make a transfusion...") when disguised as Rita Miller, there to make a profound *transaction*. But in the text Oda Mae's "soulful" dimensions are played out as lying, swindling, racketeering, forging, and posing — all hinging on her skills as a fake, not to mention her criminality, both of which would seem to redeem her exploitation as a medium. And what could be more appropriate to her appropriation for this consummate ritual than the "righteous" voices of Bill Medley and Bobby Hatfield singing "Unchained Melody" in "whiteface"? In *Ghost*, what goes around comes around.

Is there anything at all for Oda Mae in the bargain of "soul"-swapping? Let's turn to the moment when she finds her powers most lucrative. Oda Mae is holding one of her now famous "church meetings" for which even people from Jersey flock to her side. These are pastiche rituals performed in the colorful ambience of candle flames, Christmas bulbs, and gold satin vestments glowing under tiffany lamplight. With her sound effects of Gospel music, wind chimes, and African drums, and flanked by her testifying "sisters" with collection pockets, Oda Mae is a walking syncretism, not between symbolic belief systems but between her urban rat existence and her spiritual heritage. It's the ghost Orlando who accidentally succeeds in demonstrating that she can "house" another soul when he dives into her body unsolicited. However when he uses Oda Mae as a medium, it's as an auditory one: his wife hears his voice but sees Oda Mae. This is because his wife is *looking*. The power to *feel* a soul is in the *mind*, through the same means by which ghosts make objects move.

And this brings us to Oda Mae's ultimate feat: Sam's transfiguration. In the final moments of the film a radical metamorphosis transpires and Molly can hear, talk

to, and *feel* Sam. By cinematic irradiation, Sam is infused with a heavenly light like that of Christ on the mountain, and emitting this aura, he appears in a spiritual "vision" to Molly. They seal it with a kiss. But does it emanate from Sam, Molly, or Oda Mae? Just as Oda Mae has brought out in Molly the power to have faith in Sam's love, which hinged on the willingness to believe in the world "other" than as evidenced, Sam has brought out in Oda Mae a knowledge of her own gift — "soul," not in the sense of a hybrid's survival skills but of cultural authenticity. If Molly is left knowing Sam loves her, Oda Mae is left knowing she has inherited her birthright and, thanks to Sam, she finds out she's not a fake. In Sam's words, her "mother'd be proud." Molly may be the sculptor — it's her imagination that brings Sam "to life"; but Sam's the (white) God-like Pygmalion, and Oda Mae's not far from being his (ghostly) Galatea. And what Sam hath given, Sam may taketh away....

In the next film we take up we shall begin to confront more precisely the problem of authenticity and the consequences of constructing an "other" in the dimensions that suit our needs. Exactly what happens in the process of psycho-social projection? What happens when our projections reciprocate, in living form? Or when we transform desire itself, and not merely its object? It's paradoxical that of all the films to be discussed here, the one most heavily laden with the projections of desire upon a human screen is the one in which the investment in miscegenation — as love, as sex, and as a three-way courtship including a child — is the fullest.

When Emily Dickinson wrote of "making a prairie" a century ago, who knows what field of play she had in mind for a "clover" and a "bee," what dynamic she envisioned for them and all that they would unleash and propagate? What's compelling is the power she ascribed to reverie — the poetic but also surely the social imagination. "The revery alone will do," she wrote. But with a severely qualifying clause: "*If bees are few*"....

In the context of this discussion we can regard her qualification not as an artist's transcendence of conventional morality nor as an expression of the longing heart but as a disconcertingly playful stroke of the pen by which she ruffles the very self-possession of the "revery" she upholds. Likewise we can recall that for a century to follow it was still widely held that it took but *one* clover and *a* bee to produce a national progeny "tainted with tar." With this in mind let's turn to a film in which (contrary to the pretexts of invaded wives, M.I.A. husbands, and surrogate partners) there is no scarcity of "bees" at all. In *Love Field* (1992) we witness both vicarious miscegenation and actual miscegenation, but we shall continue to focus on the filmic and ideological significance of the former type. In a single brief sequence the film enhances our investigation of spiritual transference at the symbolic level. It also bends the boundaries of physical and social spaces drawn by constructions of race and gender, re-framing those spaces according to the desires and behaviors of the players who inhabit them.

MATTERS OF THE FLESH: PROJECTION AND THE PRICE

*Our day will come,
If we just wait awhile.*

*No tears for me —
Make love and wear a smile.*

*Our dreams have magic because we'll always stay
in love this way
Our day will come.*

Ruby and the Romantics, 1963

In *Sommersby* we saw vulnerability to loss as the seedbed of new survival strategies and home-grown regeneration. In *Love Field* (1992) we shall discover vulnerability to loss as a disposition for fragile but indelible empowerment. What on the surface is a hackneyed melodrama of circumstantial mishaps and conveniently sentimental reactions emerges quietly in its afterglow as an intimate odyssey of social revelation and personal commitment. The road, not the home, becomes the ground for re-birth, and it breeds the bonds of an alternative family-in-the-making. The narrative is launched when a woman as all-American as baby-chick-blonde bouffant hair, a walking advertisement of 1960's patriotic mythologies, participates in the ritual of ogling her President and First Lady. But this overt, unconscious complicity with the powers-that-be crumbles as she traverses the territory of transgression, in which private compassion threatens broadcast as headline violation. Still, our heroine "goes the distance."



Love Field Jonathan Kaplan 1993

T o a S a f e r P l a c e

*Enny, meeny, mine-y, mo,
Catch a nigger by the toe. If he hollers, make him pay Fifty
dollars every day. O-U-T spells "Out," And that means Y-O-
U! My mother told me To pick you!*

Counting-out rhyme for children's games

Love Field has been ascribed a wide range of genre labels, from comedy, outlaw romance and TV movie to dramatic adventure, period piece, and road film. I would prefer to regard it as a reinscription of a 50's/60's genre — the "bus ride picture." As it trudges through the social-psychological debris of JFK's assassination anticipating Malcolm's, Martin's and Bobby's but also alluding to the

mysterious death of a star-mistress only one year earlier, *Love Field* is a cross between *Bus Stop* (1956), a film farce of masculine insensitivity to women's needs from a play by William Inge, and *Dutchman* (1966), a film drama of the power of a white woman to destroy a black man from a play by Leroy Jones. Embarking on separate missions, two troubled adults take up their seats on two customarily separate and unequal ends of the bus, but it happens that each lands close to the other's border. Their overlapping terrain is a child, both real and imaginary, whom they would deliver from abuse. In *Love Field* there are many convenience stops (handy coincidences and plot contrivances) along the road, but what interests me is what the film is driving at.

As we take to the road with Lurene Hallett, *Love Field's* narrative movement gains in dimension, gathering moss, so to speak, as a specific quest that becomes a desperate flight and emerges as an on-going journey. From the outset its two protagonists manifest superficially parallel needs. At first Lurene would like to enact her identification with a "beautiful" and "heroic" husband-and-wife couple who have suffered tragic death and loss, and Paul would like to rescue his young daughter from a children's home. Lurene, her heroine Jackie Kennedy, and her captive companion Paul have all "lost a child," in a sense (the women through miscarriages, the man through abandonment on his part); and every bit as much as Lurene and Jackie have lost "a husband" in JFK, Paul and his daughter Jonell have lost "a mother." But en route through the South, the mutual emotional quest is transfigured into the shared social flight of two refugees, a domestically trapped white woman and a subjugated black man who are at turns alienated, exasperated with each other, and compassionate. So their quest/flight emerges as a journey in which each one discovers not just the *other's* world, but also his/her *own*, and furthermore, *their own*.

From Narcissus to Nemesis

There was an old dog on a raft and he had a bone in his teeth and he looked down into the water and saw a dog carrying a bone and he dropped the one he was holding to snatch the other dog's bone away and so lost both bones, the real and the imaginary.

Ellen Gilchrist
Falling Through Space 1987

The field of representation — where black images are concerned — has always been a plantation culture.

bell hooks
"Malcolm X: Consumed by Images"
Z Magazine, March, 1993

Isn't it the case that *our own* fear and complicity make us suspicious of people in power — that were we

able to see the fact of our projections of power(lessness) upon others, we might find it valuable to scrutinize such a process, to learn from our own disempowerment, to bridge rather than to exacerbate our differences?

Lurene's projections upon Paul are self-enabling. For Mrs. Ray Hallett (who doesn't have a car of her own but is content to take a cross-country bus if it gets her where she's going), Mr. Paul Cater becomes a handy vehicle, and a rest stop, and finally a safe haven during her unconscious flight from patriarchy. Still we all project ourselves. Projection is an on-going, affective process of identification with others, enmeshed with our desires and with the political enactments by which we make our own identities. Projection is *in us*, and not just *on* the target/screen. We all project who strive to construct ourselves. But what happens when we become screens? Are there any pleasures to be derived in becoming the site of the vicarious, the threshold of the transmigration of souls? Is there validation, gratification, empowerment in becoming the facilitator of desire in difference? Are Laurel, Molly, and Lurene the only agents? While these questions may seem as perplexing in fiction films as they are in our lives, the still more fundamental issue prevails: what about our spectatorial roles within the cinematic apparatus? Can our vicarious relation to the screen expose history "hiding in the light" — the parasite of myth that feeds on fact — but also the ever-capacitating ground for re-making images as we re-make ourselves? Let's now focus these questions through a particular scene in *Love Field*.

Lurene Hallett is the kind of person who never met a stranger. What's more, none of life's shibboleths have ever been incorporated into her person because she's never been able to remain silent long enough to find out what social code she might be violating. So it's second nature for Lurene to rehearse her practice of conflating cultural estrangement with affection. At a turning point in the film, while Lurene is dressing Paul's wounds, she shares with him her reverie of a holiday south of the border with her husband Ray where he couldn't read the signs or the newspapers because "everything was in Mexican." She sighs, "I loved him then," savoring her memory of linguistic dislocation. But with Ray she was a partner in poverty. Now her ambivalent identification with Paul enriches her self-doubt. "You see, I don't 'get' ordinary life," she confesses.

When the camera closes in on Paul's naked torso, we become as self-conscious as Paul and Lurene. It is in this moment that she displaces two losses by transferring them to Paul's bare body. Tenderly daubing his skin, she explains, "I used to listen to Ray's voice and pretend it was Jack's. Well it eased me..." Here we see the projection of two objects of desire onto a third. But we also hear an enunciation of the projection process itself simultaneous with the new performance of it. Within this aural-visual context the words "it eased me" ring softly as an invitation to reciprocate in the process. If at this moment Lurene doesn't see Paul as Paul, *we do* (to the extent that he's been fleshed out as a character). And what separates emotion



Love Field Jonathan Kaplan 1993

from intellect in our vicarious pleasure? Does the film here beg an alternative contract with the spectator, or are voyeurism and commitment incompatible bedfellows? If Lurene's innuendo reframes the two visible objects of desire as a potential subject-to-subject exchange, does the eroticizing of Paul's body permit our transgressive reinscription of his person?

We invest *Love Field* with these alternative possibilities to the extent that Lurene is capable of "trying on" alternative personae, for in stepping out of her straight-jacket to animate these waxen relics, she not only flags them as constructions but also demonstrates the means by which we make ourselves, often enough encouraged by our relation to the cinema, television, and photography screens prevalent in *Love Field*'s filmic structure.

A Star Is Born: From Camelot to Love Field

Jack Kennedy, you might say, was no Jack Kennedy... all (he) really understood was what he took from his father: the irresistible exploitation of power through the haze of glamour. Kennedy's charm was his own transcendental gift. Given the sacredness of office, the gift turned into something terrible. When it was brutally ignored, as it was by Khrushchev, Kennedy's will froze, and insisted on revenge. That is charisma, all right, and bloody dangerous too. Its radioactivity expanded after the assassin's bullets blew half the President's head away. Only if murdered can an ex-President retain the numen of authority.

Fred Inglis

"No Jack Kennedy"

The Nation, December 28, 1992

What happened was this. There were these beautiful feelings and loose little pleasures inside me. And this woman was something like an assembly line for my soul. I run these little pieces of myself through her and I come out complete. Now do you follow me?

Carson McCullers

"A Tree - a Rock - a Cloud" 1951

Lurene appropriates the involuntary proximity of Paul and Jonell for her work on her own identity. She would like to process "Lurene Haller" through the dream-scape of their friendly (or unfriendly) presence beside her and come out on the other side like Jack's wife Jackie. In fact we have never known Lurene in any state other than "processed." Even so, she registers as always a bit "beside herself" — that is, her very image and body language look one step removed from the woman she would like to be, and miles from the models she emulates. This is the basis upon which we begin to see not only *what* Lurene is doing

but *that* she is doing it. It is precisely the point that her character doesn't simply exist; by virtue of the film's characterization and Michelle Pfeiffer's acting, the creation of Lurene seems always en route. Lurene drafts her own bodyscape (as a beautician and seamstress) from the patterns of those who infatuate her; the signifying gestures of her body language show us how she makes herself even when she isn't taking stock of the process. Then it's up to us to ponder the effects of her efforts.

Her cosmetic face, hair, and costume are manufactured with all the subtlety of the airbrush technology spoofed in Joost Veerkamp's *Make-Up for Beginners* (his 1987 progression from Brigitte Bardot to David Bowie and back again in six frames). Lurene is a caricature in motion, but also a walking repository for the visual mythologies of early-60's female celebrities. Her body becomes a clearing-house for the exchange of cultural currencies, but also a kaleidoscopic dissolve of flip sides of the same coin — Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe — that get "run all together" the way Louise Irene has mixed her own name to get "Lurene."

In the aforementioned scene in which she tends to Paul's wounds, an unusual two-shot situates Lurene in the background with Paul in the foreground as the Law comes looking for Paul. Lurene uses her "feminine" wiles to confront the situation outside, and the interior location of Paul's apprehensive silence is framed by a kitchen window through which we see the exterior location of Lurene's alluring flirtation with the officer. For some moments the (black male) body of quietly defensive eclipse upstages the titillatingly aggressive drawl and sway of the (white female) spectacle on "decoy duty." We dwell upon Paul's jeopardy. But it has also become Lurene's. Let's look at the sliding role-play of her talented deception in the barnyard outside: in shielding Paul, posed as husband Ray/JFK, this momentary nurse, miming wife Jackie, embodying girlfriend Marilyn, hiding from Mrs. Hallett, is enacting a new Lurene. Is it a lie? A masquerade? An introjection? A denial? A self-construction of identity? From her action as nursemaid, her impersonation of her First Lady, and her self-inscription as Monroe to her concealment of her own power and culminating presence, we make our own meaning. Who is the coy performer walking this sexo-racial tightrope in our own (1963 Virginia) backyard?

It's not Jackie nor Marilyn nor the old Lurene who "comes out in the wash" of soluble surfaces, but a new woman, her own agent every bit as much as she has projected herself upon the somatic screens of the physically and socially wounded, Paul Cater and his daughter Jonell. But the human screens beside her talk and act "back," through their own identifications and desires. What's the power play in the exchange? What *is* the difference between "being bored" and "being black"?

In the narrative alone, Lurene's work results in improving her life, not theirs, and sentimental affiliation reads mostly as narcissistic musing rather than political enactment. In the filmic plot Lurene is Paul's nemesis; in



Love Field Jonathan Kaplan

its social narrative the film structures a disturbing absence of Paul's position, needs, motivations and reactions. However, in *Love Field's* aural-visual text and mythic subtext, Lurene's sexual-political identifications situate her as a violated victim turned agent-to-be-reckoned-with. Nurtured by her desires — Paul not withstanding, as both object and subject in this process — her formulated identity impacts her actions. In the end she has forged her self on a relational basis.

It's important to take note that Lurene's disguise as Marilyn is never disclosed, within either the narrative or the aural-visual texts of *Love Field*, and also that Lurene's immediate on-screen actions often consist of lies overtly (but not covertly) complicit with racism and sexism. Yet the relation between the aural-visual text and the subtext tells us that Lurene's struggle as a dependent and underdeveloped woman hinges not on her individual political actions at any given moment but on a collective resistance over time, on a relation among us as spectators vicariously constructing meaning upon the screen before our eyes — our relational resistance to historical alliances between patriarchy and racism, a resistance from which identity politics is not to be excluded.

From Desiring Indifference to Desire in Difference

People had a habit of looking at me as if I were some kind of mirror instead of a person. They didn't see me, they saw their own lewd thoughts, then they white-masked themselves by calling me the lewd one.

Marilyn Monroe in *Marilyn Monroe* by
Graham McCann 1988

Such is the very transgressive desire embodied in cinema, and the constitution of the "body" of female spectatorship extends the enjoyment of nomadic erotic pleasures to the female. Through filmic transito the female may thus reclaim desire — its indecency, license, and wandering paths — outside the logic of the criminalization of pleasure.

Giuliana Bruno
"Spectatatorial Embodiments:
Anatomies of the Visible and the Female
Bodyscape"
Camera Obscura 28, 1992

Beginning with the moment Lurene lights out from her husband we can read her sojourn for the capital in three dimensions of space: the physically enclosed (within three vehicles, a Greyhound depot, two "white ladies rooms," a Virginia country house, a barn, a motel room, and a foster home); the topographically directed (through Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington D.C.); and the transgressively inscribed (social defiance of the written laws of marriage, of the unwritten laws of race, and of the unspoken laws of class). The segregated bus ride launches a "soul transit" for Lurene in more ways than one.

Lurene's dismounting from the bus, it must not be forgotten, is the result of a chain of events that ensued when she reported Paul "Johnson" to the FBI as a kidnaper of his own daughter. The criminality she projects upon him, signified to her by his alias name and Jonell's bodily "evidence," is ironically what implicates Lurene herself in criminality, not so much as an accomplice in a felony but as a player in miscegenation. Her increasing transgression plants her in the nomadic ground of *transito* — of a physical and mental traversing of desire that includes erotic circulation. What's more, her social marginality takes on a cinematic agency that extends to us. The socio-sexual geography of the film becomes progressively significant as the camera dwells increasingly on both the association of black/white images within the frame and the shared embodiment of gender roles emanating from Lurene who, already reconfigured as Lurene-Jackie and Lurene-Marilyn, comes also to be re-positioned in the *mise en scène* and the narrative as the mother she never was. This is facilitated by Paul's role-play of the father *he* never was. A space designated as Men/Ladies or Colored/White (from buses and washrooms to sleeping quarters and foster homes) becomes a utilitarian any-one's-land when the need arises. Furthermore both of these binary designations overlap with each other when the purpose at-hand becomes shared spaces for shared wounds.

For the women in the film, young and old, present and mythic (from Jonell and Lurene to Jackie and Marilyn), those wounds have ranged from physical abuse to terminated pregnancies. Both on-screen and off-screen, the image of the child gains a strong currency. Symbolically, the film's trajectory from the desiring indifference of both Lurene (to racial antagonism) and Paul (to misogyny) to their desire *in* difference is the thematic movement from flight to commitment and the subtextual movement from miscarriage to miscegenation, from *failed* to *mixed* "procreation." Jonell's doll, ubiquitous in the *mise en scène*, is a key icon in this light, and is figured as the "third child" in a number of notable three-shots including Lurene and Jonell. For example, at the "end of the road" in the plot's suspense, Lurene is exposed with Jonell and doll in-hand on the grassy knoll rising to the Washington Monument — gunned down by searchlights and loudspeakers enforcing her public submission. The shot evokes the widowed madonna Jacqueline (riding in her husband's cortège within a stone's throw of Lurene at that very moment) but also the female vulnerability attrib-

uted to Monroe upon her suicide and mythic life-after-death.

In the resolution of the overall narrative Lurene has come of age in terms of social maturity. She has her own car, one passed on to her from an older woman, and while she still doesn't know where she's headed, now she's in charge of the wheels. Though in the course of *Love Field* we learn no more about the power of racism as a historical institution, or about Paul's and Jonell's positions within it, than does Lurene, we do learn, as she does, the power of alternatives for a woman. And if in this process Paul is Lurene's reflecting surface in troubled waters and Jonell her echo, a deceptively potent insight into women's losses and loves is gleaned on the back of the racial Other. The price of such a venture, transposed as the man's expense within similar regimes of race and gender but also of nationality and sexuality, is illuminated in the next film.

COMING OUT TO PLAY THE CRYING GAME

*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit Shall
lure it back to cancel half a line, Nor all your
Tears wash out a word of it.*

Omar Khayyām *Rubāiyāt*

In matters of grave importance, style — not sincerity — is the vital thing.

Oscar Wilde

The Importance of Being Earnest, 1894

The Crying Game is intriguing with its puzzling characters, twisty plot, and genre-hopping, but even more so in the particular success of its pictorial and narrative execution of the central premise of theatrical filmmaking — the spectator's willing suspension of disbelief. At stake here is disbelief not in cinematic illusion nor fictional situation but in ideology, for within the course of the film the viewer who plays along in "the crying game" forfeits all vested interest in essentialist constructions of race, gender, nationality and sexuality to uphold a relation of miscegenation that represents and initiates social and historical consequence. It's important that through intrigue and style, Jordan facilitates our participation as performing players in a pastime that positions us as both fellow travelers and strangers vis-à-vis our own binarisms.

Near the beginning of the film Jody, a British soldier, recites to Fergus, his Irish captor, a cross-cultural folk tale about a scorpion and a frog:

A Scorpion wants to cross the river, but he can't swim. So he goes to the Frog and asks for a ride. Says the Frog, "If I take you on my back, you'll sting me." Scorpion answers, "It wouldn't be in my interest." Half-way across the river the Frog feels a burning spear in his side. He asks, "Why d'you sting me, Mr. Scorpion? Now we both will drown!" The

Scorpion replies, "I can't help it. It's in my nature."

This fable is but one of various rhetorical devices — flattery, second-guessing, reverie, positive attribution — that Jody deploys in a strategy of verbal warfare which is seductive because it is intimately emotional. Jody thereby disarms Fergus by stripping away any cloak of "differences" Fergus might have donned for the task at-hand. Proximity, affinity, and camaraderie comprise Jody's weaponry; above all his tactic, at once defensive and aggressive, is to expose Fergus as more loving than fighting by nature.

A volunteer in the Irish Republican Army, Fergus is hardly professional in his combat maneuvers. Rejecting a nationalizing inscription, he initiates his own disarmament as a soldier when he introduces himself by name to his hostage. This is because Fergus is incapable of an impersonal stance in any "matter of grave importance." For him (as opposed to Jody and Dil) *sincerity*, and not style, "is the vital thing." Due to his tactical errors, his days are numbered as far as the IRA is concerned, and it is no wonder that he is ultimately set up as cannon fodder on a suicide mission. It's Jody who puts the handwriting on the wall for Fergus: the scorpion stings because it's in its nature. Thus Fergus will be required to kill Jody (and Jude to kill Fergus, Dil to kill Jude, and so on). Nevertheless Fergus will not be saved by Jody's savvy hints and warnings. "She's not your type," Jody pronounces to Fergus regarding Dil. Ironically Jody, Fergus' captive, is his best informer, particularly pertaining to Fergus' emotional needs. Yet the forbidden always beckons, and we are not surprised to see Fergus pursue Dil; but we don't expect to see him blinded by love.

Of Chameleons and Camouflage

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:11-13

... the only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes.

Oscar Wilde

"The Soul of Man under Socialism" 1891

Fergus' blindness is the key to *The Crying Game*. It is the element that subverts an essentialist reading of Jody's fable. In the film's outer narrative the "scorpion" (be it Jude or Jody or Dil) stings not out of innate vicious-

ness but in response to precipitating political conditions. But because Fergus is mobilized and also consumed by compassion, he loses sight of the social field in which he moves, and (unlike Jody) he can't adequately visualize the operations of the adversary. Fergus will be "stung" three times — by Jody's death, by Dil's gender, and by Jude's final confrontation, for which he will pay a price for years to come. Particularly because Fergus himself has been a player in each of these "crying games," each "burning spear" scars his consciousness. In the end Fergus has ultimately betrayed all three characters — friend, lover, and foe. Or was it enemy, ward, and comrade? The question is precisely the point. No one can mean *essentially* anything to Fergus because virtually *nothing* is "in his nature." Nothing, that is, except love. Much is made of Jody's fable, yet it is Fergus' allusion to the Bible that is the pivotal soliloquy in the film: "When I was a child, I thought as a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things..." Without love, all talents are empty.

If *The Crying Game* is a play on/with identity politics, it is more concerned with politics than with identity, just as it is more concerned with love than desire. On the one hand Fergus, as fluidly as he "moves across the water," is a chameleon without the cover of camouflage. At a risk he can't see, he pursues Dil as a short-haired Scottish "Jimmy," though his boss and even Col, the Metro's barman, chide him as "Paddy." Downing his whiskey, he overlooks the fact that Dil and likely others have noted his accent. Headlines follow Fergus, as does his IRA court-martial. Sandwiched between the desires of Jude and Dil, two opponents in the game, his fate is sealed. To whatever ends Fergus goes to "lose himself," to become a "Mr. Nobody," his non-entity is inscribed by others — "Brits" and "Pads," lovers and terrorists, men and women, gays and straights alike — and Fergus is the last to know it.

On the other hand it's the same naiveté, carelessness, and impulsiveness that allow Fergus to take the political risks that forge his character. His blindness is his boon — and ours. Not invested in a fixed, elaborated, enunciated identity (for instance: white Irish heterosexual revolutionary male), Fergus invites any spectator to "move across the water" with him, to defy the "sting" in a changeable set of social conditions and subjective relations in which he is an active player. All that detectably constitutes Fergus, and in fact compels him, is love and its incumbent responsibility in a loveless world.

Amazingly it's neither Fergus' sexuality nor nationality but his non-descript vulnerability that defines him. And while he is hardly the transgressor, he is upsetting. That is, ontologically, epistemologically and politically his behavior mocks the word "nature," a concept that becomes quizzical as the game is played out. *Nature* emerges as a strictly semantic term hinging upon social relations. Surely the Scorpion jests to proclaim no "interest" in stinging, but indeed we all "will drown" from the "sting" in the legitimizing process whereby social relations are mystified as "nature."

Fergus' vulnerability to loss — to the social and per-

sonal costs of loss — is the one constant in the film, and it situates us as compassionate spectators. Yet this same relation relentlessly undermines our constructions of Fergus in any given context. As a character he's opaque; as a person he's non-porous. Since the film's ground is always shifting, slipping out from under us, we feel a special need to be able to pin Fergus down, to "figure" him out, and in our own terms. In any of a wide array of bizarre circumstances we expect Fergus to be the type we project upon him, and he isn't. It becomes increasingly clear to us that he's un-inscribable: as a screen he repels our "light," which jostles comfortable spectatorial positions.

A "D o" f o r a "L o o k"

The controlling agents of the status quo may know the power of lies; dissident sub-cultures, however, are closer to knowing their value.

John Mitzel in Michael Bronski
Culture-Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility
1984

Dil's face, its physiognomy inscrutable in terms of either biological gender or cultural origin, invokes a reading of the film's play with surfaces that often glamorizes and thereby foregrounds the (re)construction of identity. In Dil's case glamour calls attention to the politics of inscription that the film demonstrates earlier in the play with Jody's hood.

The first face we see on the screen is Jody's, betraying a carefree delight in Jude's flirting sexuality, so before he's taken hostage, we know Jody's face — or do we? The hood immediately yanked over his head by Fergus serves, we assume, to prevent Jody from recognizing his captors, to control *his* point of view, not ours. In fact the hood inscribes Jody in our eyes: a colonizing "Brit" who's game for casual (drunken) sex on Irish soil, a beast who lunges at Jude in his captivity. Yet Jody's entrapment and his restrained movement (bound and blinded as he is) within the scene's frame and angles, depict him also as a caged animal. The hood itself appears to give him the nose and ears of a wolf. Like a zookeeper, Fergus feeds him morsels at a time, held out by Fergus' fingertips to Jody's mouth. But the imposed hood comes to signify the victim inside it, the film's sober score and dialogue coloring Jody as a displaced postcolonial subject drafted once more into the service of empire as colonial cannon fodder. Then again within moments the ambivalent mask is transformed from the hood of the hanged to the hood of the hangman as Jody's flattering words charm Fergus. Is Fergus' ultimate removal of the hood in the green woods of Jody's get-away an unmasking of Jody's political motives? Yes, but primarily as politics engage love, since the gesture gains resonance even before Jody's death, as the duplicitous challenge of loving *in difference*, the (un)masking of the self in the struggle to recognize the other.

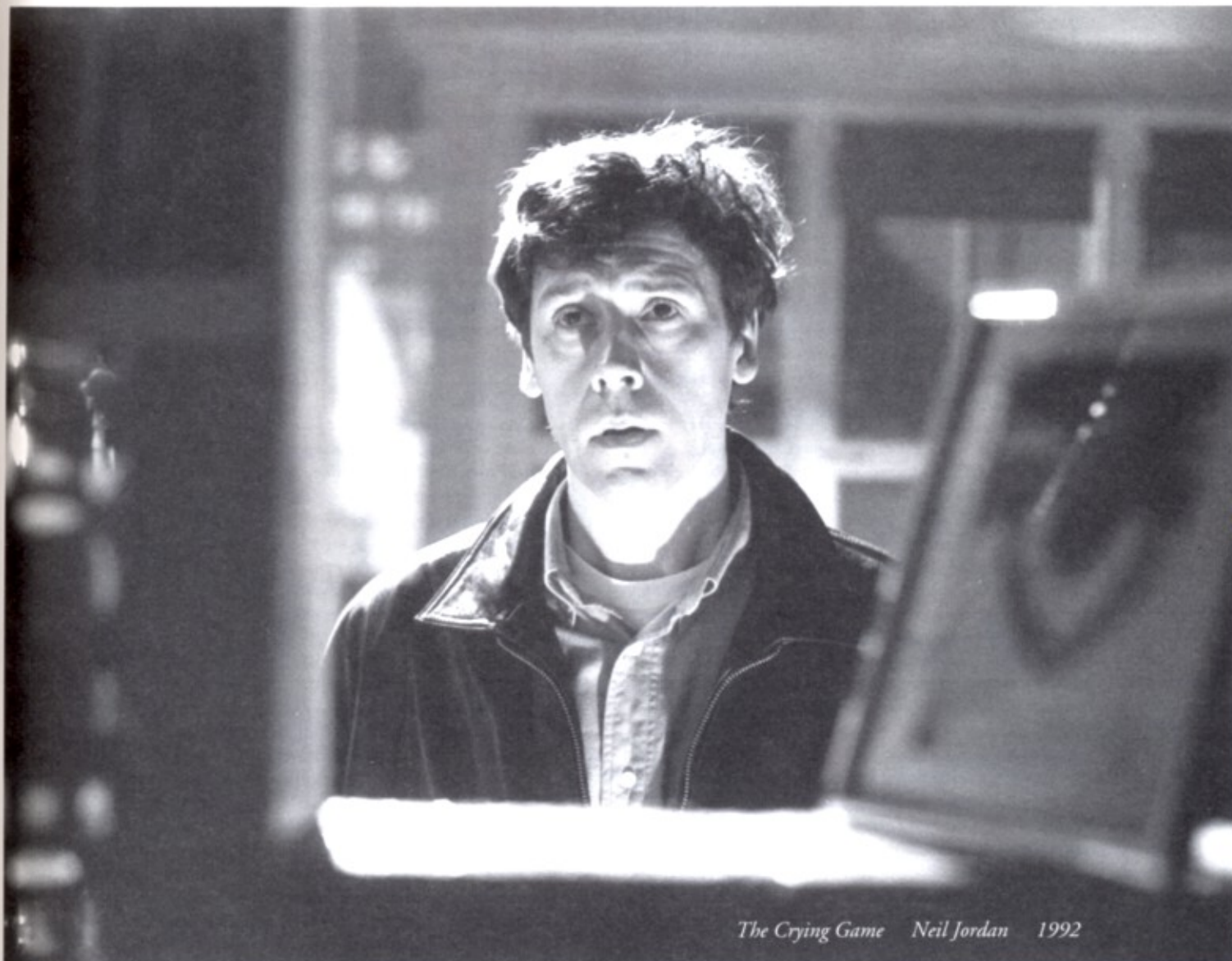
The film's *mise en scène* is a string of sites of inver-

sion. The carnival becomes the ground for Jody's fatal entrapment by a woman who "wasn't even his type." But then the "glass house" of his captivity, its thorny vines dangling like barbed wire from above, is literally a greenhouse for his captor's love. The Metro bar becomes a stage for charade in Fergus' *déjà vu* hideaway hostel a "honeymoon" room; his construction site a pavilion for a cricket pitch, and Millie's salon a haven for hair havoc — encompassing style (from Fergus to "Jimmy"), color (from the Belfast to the London Jude), and length (from "woman-Dil" to "boy-Jody"). Finally the prison in the closing scene, flooded with natural light from above as was the greenhouse, ultimately encloses captive Fergus in glass, the fragile barrier between him and his subversion in "knowing" Dil, no longer seen "through a glass darkly" when even Fergus is known.

We might fault the film for the slipperiness of its ambiguity, irony and innuendo, its refusal of a singular reading in any given scene, shot, lyric or line, let alone a preferred reading of its overall narrative. But as the game takes its course its ambivalences direct us to one fundamentally indisputable outcome: deviant desire itself is reconstituted as "in our nature." In this process the "gentlemanly" code of honor that both Jody and Dil attribute to Fergus is disclosed as a perversity *more excessive* than Jody's or Dil's sexualities: the conventional "gentleman's agreement" into which Fergus enters when he serves time for Dil's revenge respects film noir codes vis-à-vis the *woman* "of virtue"; the tongue-in-cheek parody Dil struts when s/he visits Fergus and it is finally *he*, not Jody, held (willingly) in a glass cage, Fergus mouthing Jody's fable of the scorpion, makes a mockery of this excess.

Disguise is the inverse of deceit, the "camping up" of what is already camp, when Fergus dresses Dil as Jody. Is it *only* for Dil's protection? Would Fergus prefer Dil as a man, to spare himself the ambiguity/ambivalence? Would Fergus prefer Dil as Jody, Fergus' projection in living form? Dil's answer — "I don't recognize myself..." The woman "of virtue" becomes a *femme fatale*, every bit as much as Jude and more. The turn of events exposes (or dis-clothes-es) the *femme fatale* as feminine, not female — as a mythic construction presented in ambiguous human form. As a transvestite Dil may be read as parading the claim that gender division does not inhere in nature but is a matter of social custom. In general Dil parodies and mimics the "natural" categories that exclude her; s/he theatricalizes the claim to authenticity and plays emotional extremes for irony. On the one hand s/he aestheticizes gender in such a way as to call attention to and celebrate its artifice for the pleasure it brings her in reconstituting femininity: sequined clothes and make-up "heavy on the powder" are fundamental; anatomy is a "detail." On the other hand she acts out the ambivalence of her subordination beyond gender: in cricket whites, Dil at once mirrors and menaces colonial discourse.

So we see how Dil flips Wilde's observation back on its "feet" again: In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing." Claiming desirability, s/he



The Crying Game Neil Jordan 1992

succeeds in appropriating the dominant culture's essential categories for femininity but s/he also transvalues them to create and uphold an alternative self. Dil turns the construction of binary categories inside out, wearing them on her shirtsleeves in a self-inscription that makes what is outlaw *in*law, bringing the rules of "the crying game" all-too-close to home. It's familiarity and accessibility, not exotic remoteness, that endow Dil with a provocative power.

In general in the film repetition with appropriation, inversion, and subversion displaces one conventional reading after another, at the same time displacing the spectatorial role as voyeur. We discover Fergus using the allure of Dil to project his love of Jody. But is Dil just a screen? No. She (and Jody) are the catalysts for Fergus to transform desire itself — into love and commitment. What's of interest is *how* the film manages this transformation,

deconstructing not only essential social categories but the process of social construction itself, and not only social codes but filmic codes as well. The film's pastiche and kitsch use the surface to critique deep-rooted cultural history. If, as *The Crying Game* posits, terrorism is the result of political failure, what happens when terrorism fails, when semiotic codes themselves break down, (and the social constructions they carry, latent and active)? Can the return of the repressed, in social relations and in language, make us into something new? Can desire-as-voyeurism be displaced by love-as-commitment?

The Crying Game eroticizes the social by presenting us with a sense of mutual need and identification between Jody and Fergus. If Dil is the threshold for Fergus' psychological embrace of Jody in the hindsight of his dreams and the wisdom of his fantasies — an emotional embrace

Fergus can't manage physically with Dil any more than he could with Jody — then the erotic subtext at least comes to the surface through Dil as a vehicle. But as s/he perverts the terms of the masculine discourse from within its own limits, Dil's seemingly frail re-constitution exceeds "her" homoerotic appeal, and s/he both exudes and commands a charismatic devotion. It is worth noting that it is not only Fergus who uses Dil and Jody as screens but also Jody and Dil who both deploy Fergus likewise. While in each case they may use him somewhat less vicariously (Dil emotionally and Jody politically), their relations with Fergus depend largely upon the positive attributions they assign to and impose upon him.

As (hair)dresser and (disco) performer — as the maker of her own masquerade and mime, Dil is the perfect foil for Fergus' subjection to the return of Jody, but also for *The Crying Game* to animate our own return of the repressed upon our cinematic screen. If cricket signifies "the rules of the game" — of the "gentlemanly courtship" of the gendered and racial Other in the class relations of empire, Dil, as decentered subject of patriarchy and colonialism, sports the film's critique of both regimes. S/he illustrates how even (or especially) in cinema we are enlisted as voyeurs gazing past a threshold. But in this film the normal feeds on the perverse. And don't we take pleasure in crossing that threshold via the characters' "crying game" played out on our screen? The film positions us as at least vicariously polymorphous. How many gender (or sex, race, and nationality) identities embodied in any of the characters are at play at any one time? As their screens become the field of play, we join them in the game.

The price of the ticket is not the loss of a "whole" or "sole" self, but the forfeit of a metaphysical guarantee of differentiation. In *The Crying Game* the adage "Know thyself" is re-stated as "Know thy discursive formations," but the challenge becomes the capacity for reinscription. Here Yeats becomes instructive: "Nothing can be sole or whole/ That has not been rent." But the film adds, "Nothing can be known that's not been spent." Fergus is blinded by love, but also by tears, and divestment leaves him naked, not engaged. As Fergus becomes his own agent, he engages us in confronting the cost of historical binarisms: giving free reign to a diversity of protagonists who play at transgressive reinscription. *The Crying Game* wins appeal through a transgressive aesthetic.

"What Do They Know of Cricket Who Only Cricket Know?"

JUDD. *What I really hate about cricket is, it's such a damned good game... The opium of the English middle-classes!*

BENNETT. (mocking) *There's no doubt about it. Cricket is a fundamental part of the capitalist conspiracy... The proletariat is forced*

to labour in the field, while the bourgeoisie indulges in the pleasures of batting and bowling. The whole system derives from the lord of the medieval manor's wholly unjustified 'right' to the unpaid labour of villeins at haymaking and harvest.

Julian Mitchell
Another Country
1982

In Antigua cricket's the black man's game... My daddy had me throwing googlies from the age of five. Then we moved to Tottenham and it was something different.

Jody
The Crying Game

Does he bat, bowl, and field black? He plays the game of powers emancipating themselves in a field that needs emancipation... The real problem is that we maintain that ancient distinction between social life and games... (For the secret is that a great cricketer) is never exactly orthodox. The infallible sign of his greatness is that somewhere in his method he is breaking the rules, or if not the rules, the practices of his distinguished equals.

C.L.R. James *Cricket* 1986

In England cricket, for some eight centuries, has signified the tradition of "fair play"; in fact, cricket came to be synonymous with tradition itself. Unlike football (soccer), it offers little instant gratification. Rather, cricket slows the tempo of life with pauses, so players and fans alike must tolerate the time factor. It is agreed that this tolerance itself builds "character." But if British cricket peaked with W.G. Grace at the height of English imperial rule, colonial cricket brought the empire back home. Jody and Dil, in their eloquence, engage Fergus in reinscribing the game from within. Though his move was from the cricket pitches in Antigua to those of Tottenham, Jody might as well be playing at Lords in north London. Instead he bowls in Fergus' haunted reverie.

The West Indians' consciousness of history has been a product of cricket. Raised on the English public school code, British West Indian colonial subjects were taught to "play with the team," to "keep a stiff upper lip," and to refer to failure as "hard luck" or an effort "well tried." On the cricket field all players were posed as equal regardless of class, caste, and color, yet in the West Indies cricket has always been a source of social awareness and differentiation as well as national unity. Whereas at the turn of the century Caribbean cricket was imbued with the Puritan mentality of English colonizers, by the late 1960's it was a conveyor of revolt against apartheid in South Africa. C.L.R. James, for one, both read and led West Indian independence through the game. His 1963 book *Beyond a Boundary* became more than a cricket classic.

The Crying Game opens as a loudspeaker at a carnival blasts Percy Sledge singing, "When a Man Loves a Woman" while Jody throws a ring around a bowling pin to win a teddy bear. He tosses the bear to Jude, musing, "That's cricket, hon." The terms of the game are set right there. Jody falls prey to the woman Jude, but "shit-hot" bowler Jody, who really loves his "woman" Dil, brings the game full circle. The film ends, of course, with the song, "Stand by Your Man," ironically reinscribed through the interplay of Fergus and Dil, in which Jody participates by proxy.

Is Dil disembodied by Fergus? Is Jody? Does it begin there? If Fergus' remorse in the loss of Jody leads him to use the vicarious to live out the promise of love, then the last word on miscegenation lies there: in *The Crying Game* the vicarious addresses both the race and gender issues of miscegenation — let alone issues of sexuality and nationality — not so much through voyeurism as through love.

Fergus is possessed by a love that impinges upon his perception and complicates his judgement of the relations of men in war. In the first instance we are confronted with two men positioned by their relations to historically imperial Britain — two pawns on the colonizer's chessboard. Jody, landing in "the one place where they call you 'nigger' to your face," incapacitates Fergus as his strategic enemy and wins him over to camaraderie. But the scene in which Jody enlists Fergus to assist him in "relieving himself" is not simply a symbolic paradox of homosocial bonding — "penises in parallel," soldier-for-soldier, both lined up along the same "fence" in this case. The proximity between their sexual and non-sexual relations — that is, between their homosexuality and their homosociality, is foreclosed by Jody's death, but the manner of his death and Fergus' response to it directs our focus to that which the relation anticipates — an entirely precarious disjunction between identification and desire that will live on in Fergus' relation with Dil. In other words, Fergus' transgression in bonding with his prisoner, a fellow colonized subject, is contained in Jody's death, but it produces another subversive knowledge, the potent play of the transvestite in Dil, and yet another in the irony and ambiguity of the last line of the film, the last line of Jody's fable, that the spectator must fill in... and the game goes on....

Fergus' involuntary dreams of Jody are his fantasized convergence of identification with and desire for Jody. Dil gives them a field of play. To whatever extent Fergus repressed a desire, he gives it new currency with Dil. What is deviant is transvalued as normal and "natural." Jody is not simply a perverse return of Fergus' repressed self, a disavowal of homoerotic feelings, but the betrayal of a homosocial bond close-by on the same continuum. Rather than disavowing his desire for Jody, Fergus seeks to emulate him — even to be him — or at least to play his role, or at the very least, to retrieve him once again in Dil. If the repressed returns to Fergus, it's not to haunt him but to guide him.

OF PAWNS AND PLAYERS IN THE "RECOVERY ERA": TRANS-VESTED INTERESTS IN THE GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

... the vision of desire as loss is strangely inseparable from both the blindness of desire and its capacity to know more than it wants.

Jonathan Dollimore
Sexual Dissidence
1991

Narrative, song, and image can work powerfully in containing and sublimating desire, but *The Crying Game* renders them as ambivalent as desire itself. Desire always provokes that backward glance, and the possibility of reading the history it betrays, in many ways "a history of heterosexuality hardly known to itself." Within his own sexuality Fergus faces the divides of race and gender. Does this looking glass put us in touch with the process of loving the person *we create* but also who *we become* in the process?

Fergus is inscribed by history but he also writes his own, as he moves through it, and as such he becomes our vehicle. When Jude remarks to Fergus, regarding his bungled assassinations, "Not once, but twice!" the line resonates with regard to his romantic relations as well, his psychic denial of what he feels has twice gotten the better of him; but in both affairs, Fergus responds to the return of the repressed. Moved by some powerful performances, he is game to play.

We have seen that our own reinscriptions of who we are, facilitated by an understanding of all that we repress as historical persons, can be more far-reaching than a simple divestment of the binarisms constructed by patriarchy and colonialism, and even more demanding than miscegenation per se. The confusion that survives loss can bring the sensitivity and openness needed for the capacity to change — vulnerability to loss *can* breed a fragile but indelible empowerment. The vicarious pleasures we project upon our screens, cinematic and other-wise, can be as enabling as they are illuminating.


I wish to thank Jonathan Dollimore for his captivating illustrations of his term "transgressive reinscription" and his fascinating theory of what he calls "eroticizing the social" in his book, Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) which, along with Neil Jordan's The Crying Game (Miramax, 1992), inspired this study.

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A black and white portrait of a woman with short dark hair and round glasses, looking directly at the camera. She is wearing a light-colored collared shirt. The background is dark and out of focus.

Encountering Chinese Modernity in *For Fun:*

An Interview With Ning Ying

by
Xiaoping Li

*To be modern
is to find our-
selves in an envi-
ronment that
promises
adventure,
power, joy,
growth, transfor-
mation of our-
selves and the
world — and, at
the same time,
that threatens to
destroy every-
thing we have,
everything we
know,
everything
we are.*

*Berman,
All That Is Solid
Melts Into Air*



The 1993 Festival of Festivals provided an ample array of China's "new wave" cinema — films produced by graduates from the Beijing Film Institute after the Cultural Revolution. Clearly evident in earlier celebrated films such as *Yellow Earth*, *One and Eight* and *Red Sorghum*, the vitality of the "new wave" is sustained by formal innovation, stunning visual images, unusual narrative strategies, and, in general, deviation from standard treatments of Chinese materials. These characteristics signal a radical departure from earlier Chinese cinematic conventions — as combinations of cliché-ridden film language and overly dramatized narratives formerly "plagued" Chinese film production.

However, if Chinese films screened at this year's festival indicate a return to realism by the "veterans" of the "new wave," they also suggest an emerging generation gap. Cheng Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine* and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*, for example, are situated in the past, and present an acute, critical reflexivity of China's recent history through magnifying personal/social encounters and events. Here, individuals are trapped in their times and entangled by systems. They are placed against the state or other eternal catalysts, confront unescapable trials, and are thus twisted and victimized while their integrity is tested and scrutinized. As ordeals and trials unfold the narratives split into a series of binary oppositions: repression/resistance, betrayal/loyalty, absurdity/reason, and deception/honesty.

Ning Ying's *For Fun* and Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* represent China in a radically different light. Both take on the present, both privilege the individual over the social. Greater care, particularly in *For Fun*, is given to detailed depictions of the minutiae of everyday life, individual personalities, and most importantly, individual psychologies. The rapidly changing social environment remains a mere backdrop in which characters interact. These films are much more light-hearted and relaxed; there is a certain youthful exuberance which elicits easy identification and empathy.

All of the above four film makers graduated from China's central film school in the 1980s; they do, however, belong to two generations. Cheng and Tian (also Zhang Yimou, the director of *Red Sorghum*, *Judo*, and *The Story of Qiu Ju*) represent what has been named the Fifth Generation of Chinese film makers. They all are forty something and have experienced all of China's major political movements, including the Cultural Revolution. Once Red Guards themselves, they underwent both a "revolutionary fever" and subsequent traumatic disillusionment. Like most urban youths of their generation, they were forced to spend years in farm fields, factory workshops or army camps to be "re-educated." Nevertheless, the dislocation generated not obedience but a critical, rebellious consciousness.



Not surprisingly, the Fifth Generation is noted for a strong sense of mission and political commitment in addition to their use of stylistic innovation and symbolization. I believe they have transformed film-making into a political act by offering alternative visions of Chinese realities (a much needed antidote against so-called official "socialist-realism"). Their films have activated critical reflections on the nation, history, and tradition and rendered visible intricate ties between the past, present, and future. Touched by China's brutal history, the Fifth Generation has nevertheless found in history inspiration and strength.

With Ning Ying and Zhang Yuan, however, we may envision the emergence of the Sixth Generation. This represents a younger generation intrigued by Chinese modernity. Showing little interest in the past, they venture to capture modernity's impulses from the myriad facets of everyday life, presenting them in a more or less detached manner, with dismay, perplexity, nostalgia, anticipation, and other "structures of feelings" typical of a transition from the traditional to the modern. All these elements are evident in Ning Ying's delightful film *For Fun*.

I interviewed this young woman who maintains in almost every particularity conventional (mainland) Chinese looks. A former classmate of Zhang Yimou, Cheng Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang, Ning Ying nevertheless seems to have found her own niche. *For Fun* charms its audiences with a delightful story about a group of old men, Peking Opera amateurs, searching for meaningful, communal ways of spending their late years. Its subject matter, carefully wrought details, and astute and engaging characterization has won such commentary as the "first personal film from China." In the following interview, Ning Ying stressed her interest in the individual and her faith in a universal humanity. She hoped not only to fill a gap in Chinese cinema, but also to make her film accessible to all. Trained both in China and Italy, and with experience working with Bernardo Bertolucci, Ning Ying seems to have moved beyond her cultural and national boundaries.

But I believe *For Fun* is a genuine (mainland) Chinese film, partially due to the fact that nothing in the plot, characterization, and visual language is foreign or incomprehensible to the mainlanders' sensibility. Its simple, realist style directly descends from traditions in Chinese literature, theatre and film. The characters remind me of old folks that

surrounded me during my childhood and whom later I met in the neighbourhoods of various Chinese cities. The emotions captured by the camera are ingenuous and the interpersonal conflicts are tangible and almost too close. Above all, the salient enigma it poses — that something essential is disappearing in China as modernity (and capitalism) sweeps in — is substantive. While articulating old folks' fun and "suffering", *For Fun* insistently refers to a subtext — the social and cultural impact of drastic changes in the past fourteen years. This does not lie intelligibly in *For Fun*'s favouring of the aged on its surface, but rather, in the symbolic significance carried by Peking Opera.

This traditional Chinese art form has recently become a hot subject. *Heart Strings*, a Chinese film which won two international prizes not long ago, relates a moving story of a grandpa-grandson relation blended with Peking Opera. Two other hits at the 1993 Festival of Festivals, *M. Butterfly* and *Farewell, My Concubine*, also use Peking Opera. However, there are essential differences in these various appropriations of the traditional art form. In *M. Butterfly*, Peking Opera makes possible Cronenberg's "most systematic and emotionally wrenching examination of the consequences of misperception."¹ *Farewell, My Concubine*, on the other hand, maps the ups and downs of two Peking Opera stars within fifty years' history of twentieth century China. The film's obsession lies in the excessive tension between an austere socio-political environment and an individual's imagination and ethos. *For Fun* departs from these films by speaking from a Third World position about its experience of modernity: the ongoing destruction of traditional ways of life and grass-roots cultures.

For sure, by concerning itself with the modernization process in China, the film continues a trend of Chinese cinema that dates back to the early 1980s. Since the country started economic reforms and opened to the outside world, Chinese film makers have persistently taken on issues of change — to name a few, malicious bureaucracy, the burden of tradition, prospects of modernity, and conflicts between the old and new. Most of the "films for change" pose an antagonism between tradition and modernity. Their desire for human progress in spheres of economy, politics and culture, however, are suspiciously aligned with Western dominant ideologies.

¹ Geoff Pevere, "Cliffhanger: Cronenberg and the Canadian Cultural Consciousness", *Take One*, Fall 1993, p. 9.

For Fun's take on modernity is disclosed in an unique way and this, I believe, is its strength. It does not fall into the track of pro-high-modernist zeal, nor does it denounce China's cultural past. In depicting a traditional way of life in the lived corners of Beijing it embodies the sad reality of erosion: in contemporary China, as Ning Ying states, "ways of life that have existed for thousands of years are, in a space of a few years, to be erased and disqualified by a culture fashioned by the mass media and consumerism." Therefore, while *For Fun* offers much pleasure and enjoyment, at the same time it induces a sober meditation. A living art, Peking Opera, is vanishing, and with it the possible diminution of the Chinese, their roots.

The film reveals the paradox of modernization by juxtaposing two ways of life coexisting in China's capital today. Here Hongkong commercial movies and Michael Jackson rival Peking Opera; Western commodities and metropolitan life-styles besiege a lonely, quiet, old lane — thousands of them existed in Beijing a decade ago. In a sense, then, *For Fun* insinuates modernity's reorganization of space, which has been disfigured by capitalism's exorbitant greed. As in the West, this territorial contestation is doomed with the defeat of the "old." Traditional ways of life and grass-roots cultures are being eradicated; human habitats are measured and resettled according to monetary standards. We then see the retirees' leisure is charged with tensions. These are not merely revealed through the quarrels and conflicts in the Old People's Opera Club. They are lingering in the air, threatening to engulf the small, quiet, old lane. The end of the Opera Club is symbolic. Its replacement by a Karaoke bar announces the triumph of a capitalist modernity indulgent in profitability.

Although it seems to privilege the traditional over the modern, and the local over the foreign, *For Fun* is no dingy, melancholy lament over a fading culture and way of life which is at the same time "artistically rich", "civilized and rustic." It does not yearn for the return of the past, nor attempts to offer any solutions. Toiling to present a testimony of the on-going destruction, it aims at enhancing critical awareness. Ning Ying voiced her warning explicitly: "The loss of tradition and grassroots culture is a tragedy already complete in the West, it is now repeating itself in the Third World". *For Fun* is then a reservation towards, or a gesture of resistance against the totalizing force of a capitalist-oriented modernization.

The following is an edited interview with Ning Ying. Our conversation was distracted and rushed because of her busy schedule and the general ambient hoopla at the Sutton Place Hotel. A number of my questions were left unanswered in part because she had not given much thought to them. With China's soaring commercialization in mind, I am particularly concerned about the future of Chinese cinema. I also anticipate debates over recent changes in the film distribution system, which has triggered waves of commercial films modeled on mainstream Hongkong and Hollywood film-making. I ponder about the state of a rebellious culture (of which the Fifth Generation film is a part) that emerged in the 1980s. What are the possibilities of resistance against the commercial current so pervasive in the 1990s? What are the legacies of the Third Cinema conference held in Edinburgh? How do Chinese film makers sustain their alliance with the political and cultural struggle in the Third World when they seem to rely more and more on money from profit-oriented investors in Hongkong, Taiwan, and Japan? When international film-festivals (almost held exclusively in Western countries) have a decisive say about a film maker's success and achievement, how do Chinese film makers negotiate the political problems and aesthetic possibilities of a different kind of film making?

These questions were unanswered, I think, also because it is difficult to foretell the transient, the fleeting and the contingent, in short, the future. Like many other Chinese artists, Ning Ying sees one thing as immutable. She expresses faith in "humanity" and "individuals," and stresses making film with "sincerity." These beliefs, appearing naive and apolitical, bear a certain weight if viewed in the Chinese context. Chinese society, whether in the form of feudalism, the republic or the officially claimed "socialism", is characterized by anti-humanism. For Ning Ying, the commodity fetishism threatening to dominate China today is no doubt anti-humanistic. Like the times of the "Cultural Revolution", it is left to the individual's integrity to resist against this new form of domination. However, knowing that China's screens are already flooded by commercial products and propaganda of capitalist values, I suspect an individual artist's sincerity will not be enough to match capitalism's dismantling effects. Ning Ying is quite elusive about the destructive impact of capitalism, whereas I truly fear for the future of Chinese cinema.

CINEACTION: Peking Opera seems to have become a hot subject recently. It appears in quite a number of films. Do you think that Peking Opera is an allegory for contemporary China?

NING: Certainly. Because Peking Opera is a cultural symbol, the symbol of our traditional culture. To me it symbolizes a vanishing part of traditional Chinese culture. Thus it has an additional meaning in my film. But I don't think that my film is about Peking opera. If a cultural symbol does not have a basis in humanity, it remains only a symbol. No significance. I myself know very little about Peking Opera. When I was shooting the film, I did not wish to become an expert on it. The film is made for people — hopefully, people all over the world, not for Peking Opera experts. While shooting the film, our Peking Opera consultants were eager to explain the lyrics and plots, I told them that I could not offer my audience Peking Opera lessons through my film. What I hoped to express is humanity and human emotions. The ordinary folks' everyday life and their feelings.

CINEACTION: It is said that *For Fun* is "a landmark for Chinese cinema." You yourself once also said that with *For Fun* you might have started the sixth generation of Chinese cinema. In what way does your film depart from other Chinese films, particularly those of the Fifth Generation film makers?

NING: I respect and like a lot the films made by those internationally recognized Fifth Generation film-makers. Their films emphasize the historical, political and macro. They tend to look at

society and life from a political and social perspective. I think that I take a different approach. I hope to depict various personalities from a humanist perspective. I try to look at things and people with a fresh eye, and not limit myself to conventional judgements. I think this is the major point that distinguishes me from the major Fifth Generation film makers. True, different directors have different styles. Our differences in filmmaking come from our different experiences. They all directly participated in the Cultural Revolution. I think that they must have been believers in the Revolution and therefore undergone terrible disillusionment later. I was younger. When the "Cultural Revolution" started, I was in Grade One. My involvement in the Cultural Revolution was involuntary. Perhaps from the very beginning my generation had no trust in anyone or anything. So we could look at the people and events around us from a distance. Everything was like a game. Schools were closed. All authorities (including teachers) were down. Nobody was in charge. We were totally free. In that situation, one gave more attention to personal feelings and understanding.

CINEACTION: We can read differently into the characters (particularly Old Han) and the inter-personal interactions/conflicts in the film. Are these simply reflections of individual personalities or, in some way, also symptoms of politicized life in the Chinese system?

NING: They are both. It is impossible to separate the individual from society. If you live in a system, you are a reflection /product of your lived environ-

ment. That's why I hope to present, in an unconventional way, a variety of personalities shaped by Chinese social-political systems and by the myriad facets of Chinese life. I hope my audience can detect through these personalities their life experience, their family history as well as social history, even their future. Audiences are in some sense co-producers of a film, because they read into the story their own interpretations and understandings. I certainly hope my audience will read the film in many different ways.

CINEACTION: Some mainland Chinese here felt upset at some films made by Zhang Yimou (e.g. *Judo*, *Raise the Red Lantern*), saying that he was trying to please the Western fantasy of China through exaggerations of the "backward" in Chinese traditions. In short, he is criticized for making films for Westerners. What audience do you have in mind? Who do you make films for?

NING: When making a film, it is difficult to say who exactly is the targeted audience or whether you will satisfy the audience. Many people hope to make films for film festivals, yet they may not be acknowledged by festivals. I don't think you can simply say so-and-so is making films for Westerners. Personally I like Zhang Yimou's films very much, because they make you think critically about ourselves. Zhang's films have their characteristics. He examines Chinese society — Chinese culture and feudalism — at the macro level. That's his idiosyncrasy as a director, and also a major factor of his success. In some way, we can also say that it is his audience who made him successful. I

would say that we all make films because we love life and film. We want to express our observations of life.

CINEACTION: You said that "the important thing was to break through the barriers between film and audience." What are your strategies?

NING: For me the most important thing is our attitude towards film — whether you make films with sincerity. If you are sincere, you can do a good job. By "sincerity" I mean, partially, that we should try to free ourselves from prejudices formed over years, try to transcend conventional norms and capture the boundless variety of our lifeworld. As for strategies, there are many, technically speaking. The most important is that you should be clear about what you want to say and what has touched you (emotionally), and what thoughts or experience do you share with the author and characters in the story. The style of a film should be decided by the subject matter, not otherwise. I once experimented with forms, but that was when I was a film student, a number of years ago. In a sense, making films with sincerity is all-sided, not only about the story, but also about aesthetics, and the conditions in which the film is made. Sometimes I take a realist approach, because I think that the camera is like a recorder. It should record not only what is in front of it, but also the larger society, the state of being and conditions in which the film is shot — for instance, low budget and small-scale production and other difficulties. I hope to "enlarge" the eye of the camera so that it can catch its entire surroundings, the entire society.

CINEACTION: We know that

Chinese tastes are so different from Western ones — we are used to what is called "shadow-play aesthetics." The Chinese convention treats film as drama on the screen (Xie Jin's films are typical examples). The films by Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou and Cheng Kaige have departed drastically from this tradition. But they all have caused controversies and have a relatively smaller audience within China. In terms of reaching both domestic and foreign audiences, what aesthetic possibilities do you see?

NING: I do not think that we should divide the audience as "domestic" and "foreign." Chinese film has had a long tradition of realism, but that does not mean that a realist film will for sure be accepted by the Chinese, whereas a modernist film does not have an audience. Audiences are first of all human beings like us film makers. If you are touched by a story or a character and hope to convey this to others in a realist manner, that's fine. A realist manner has many ways of expression: realism, surrealism, formalism, etc. These are technical matters. Whatever -isms you use, you must be sincere and honest. As long as you successfully express/represent the story and your audience accepts it, you succeed. We mustn't forget that those who watch our films are living human beings. They have their life experience and histories. The problem with the Chinese audiences is that for a long time they were not exposed to a large variety of films. This does not mean, however, that they can only accept one type of film. Their taste is not fixed. It is possible that during this period

of time they do not have many chances to see films of certain genres. Thus new subject matters or styles may be barriers of understanding. But this is not definite. As society changes, good works will be understood and appreciated.

CINEACTION: The changes in China since the late 1970s have provided Chinese film makers a variety of new subject matters. *For Fun* is not the only one attempting to capture moments of the present. But I feel that compared to others, it presents a unique perspective.

NING: As I said earlier, I did not present Chinese life from a single perspective, nor from a political or historical perspective. I never thought that *For Fun* can solve any social problems. I am not particularly interested in the aged and their life. What interests me is individuals living in the society, no matter who they are — men, women, the aged, children, youth. I think that an individual's personality is a reflection of his/her social cultural environment. So I aimed at generating communication among the people, not at calling attention to the situation of the aged. If you think there is anything unique in my representation of China, I would say this emphasis on the individual is my unique perspective. Since the 1980s Chinese film makers have been concerned to reflect social change from a philosophical perspective, at a macro level. There is a lack of interest in understanding human nature, and in accentuating individual values. Our best films all emphasize the magnitude, the macro, and historical. Unfortunately they have become a newly-established canon. Our best film critics and audience



have become used to seeing things only in this way. This has become an obstacle to other forms of representation. Somewhat different from them, my film concerns only human beings. I am glad to hear you say that my film deals with both the macro and micro. That's a compliment. Yes, if you are familiar with what is directly shown in the film and the context, you are my ideal audience. I think that we should make films for ordinary



people all over the world. I hope that my audience will cry, laugh, feel excited, sad, hopeful while watching my film. I think that the social function of cinema is to help people understand their life. In this sense, cinema definitely has important social responsibilities.

CINEACTION: *For Fun* concentrates on a group of old Peking Opera amateurs' search for meaningful ways of spending their late years. Yet I have sensed there is something, which is lingering stubbornly underneath the surface you try to convey through the old men's joys and "sufferings" —you used that term — in that quiet, old lane in Beijing.

NING: Right. The film is about changes in China, too. But it is a difficult task to deal with this aspect. While shooting the film, I had a lot of thoughts, but I was facing a particular story, a particular group of people. My job is to faithfully portray these people so that the audience can have certain identifications, and hopefully, generate numerous thoughts about the social context.

CINEACTION: You stated that in contemporary China, "it is no longer so important to examine problems by dividing them into women's problems, old people's problems, young people's problems. The fundamental problem is that of identity." Could you explain what you mean by that?

NING: This is a very complex social issue — that is, Chinese traditional culture and traditional ways of life are quietly yet rapidly disappearing as China's economic reforms are going on. Maybe people won't realize this until a few years later. At this moment we are so thrilled by modernity, and so far few of us have thought about it in a critical fashion. Chinese society has been changing so rapidly — we are talking about within a number of years, not decades or a century. Six or seven years ago when I went back to China from Italy I only had a small shock. Now I may say that I experience a big shock almost everyday, although I am living in Beijing and seeing things happening. Things are disappearing: our way of life — a way of life which is full of humanity — and our cultural environment. You are right that I feel sorry for the disappearance, because what is disappearing are our roots. We were born and grew up in them. I am not just speaking of thousands of years' tradition. Those three decades' "socialism" embodied our hopes and ideals, our experiences of failures, our happiness and sorrows. Now they are disappearing. As human beings we only live dozens of years. So I am depicting what I am familiar with. I cannot tell what's going to happen tomorrow, in the future, neither China's nor that of the world.

I would like to thank Kass Banning for her critical feedback.

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Imagining The New Information Order: "YOU WILL"

by

Janine
Marchessault

New communications media and particularly technologies of information transmission and retrieval (i.e., the merging of televisions and computers) are completely redefining the countenance of knowledge and entertainment. Central concerns regarding new telephonic media are access and participation or in the liberal democratic rendition, equality and freedom.

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The ideological tenet underlying the development of information superhighways across North America according to Al Gore, is (as always) informed by the liberal ideal of global community. There is a paradox here: the technological positivism that sees communications media as inherently democratic, leading naturally towards the realization of the common good by increasing civic participation, is what screens the sources of its economy and power. This paradox reflects the moral victory of western capitalism, one which is infected by the merging values of democracy and industry in the modern world. Access and choice, then, derived from the functional rationality of progress (in economics and science), are loaded terms.

AT&T's most recent promotional video *Connections: AT&T Vision of the Future* is a good example of this problematic. It promises pay-per-view television ["Have you ever watched the movie you wanted to, the minute you wanted to?"]; electronic interactive classrooms ["Learned special things from faraway places—where does jazz come from?"]; and videophones ["Tucked your baby in from a phone booth?...YOU WILL."]. Just in case YOU were worried about the effects that these new compound media might have on social stratification and the political economy of culture, a woman guides a visitor down the corridors of a high school: "I'd like to show you something". Sitting in a circle, innercity teens peer into laptops at their computer generated teachers beamed in from the educational centre in Washington D.C.. An interactive geography class unfolds differently for each of them, "giving that special help when and where it is needed." A map of North America carries the user-friendly caption *Our Eco-system* as the AT&T guide underlines something that, given the ethnic make-up of the class, was presumably already apparent: "Not all the children in this neighbourhood get that kind of attention at home." A spinning globe marks the end of the lesson and the camera zooms in on the perfect prototype for the New Information Order: the declassified disoriginated multicultural space of the New Age, the technological class.

These symbolic juxtapositions are perhaps familiar territory for those of us who still watch television: technology as feminine and utilitarian (i.e., democratic), the global as local, interactive media as emancipatory and so on. Nevertheless these utopian intonations are worth exploring in more detail for what they reveal about the difficulties that new information and entertainment technologies present for cultural analysis.

TECH- NOFEMME

Typically, new telematic media are represented within highly feminized and infantilized spaces. These work to screen the institutional structures of those multinational corporations (like AT&T) whose shares and directors are—with the almost constant mergers and takeovers currently underway in the information industries—increasingly more difficult to situate. The multinational corporation appears merely to provide a service, the technological will to will is yours alone—the certainty is you will. The question, of course, is who is being addressed here? You or me? It is precisely this mode of address—total, global and highly atomized—that foregrounds the complicated interactivity promised by the decentralized technologies of global communication.

Going beyond the soft sell of girls on motorcycles (pace dykes on bikes), women in AT&T's *New Information Order* take the form of mothers using new communications technology (Ma Bell is the original network model here) or as technologies to be used. That is, new technologies are feminized/naturalized by virtue of the women/children/racial 'minorities' who use them or else they are feminine by nature. Either way they are being marketed in that strange and ambiguous juncture of the feminine and the technological; that space which, Mary Ann Doane points out, is not so much about production as it is about reproduction.¹

In AT&T's electronic classroom (featured at least three times throughout the video), women and black men are both teachers (absolute expressions of liberalism) and machines (computer generated) that are replacing the mother and the absent father, filling in that absence and healing the wound of the broken home. Indeed, the circle of students in the classroom reproduces that tried and true picture of consumer harmony, stability and democracy: the family circle. Roland Marchand has commented on how this Victorian convention has functioned so effectively to market modern household goods. The image, the characteristic family posed in semi-circle around a particular technology, invokes a sense of domestic sanctity, warding off the centrifugal social forces of modernity while accommodating its technologies.² AT&T draws out this sanctity across public and private spaces, across the categories of gender, race and class: the middle class home, the airport, the shopping mall, the innercity school. Each of these spaces is equalized, flattened and made over into classless expressions of consumer freedom.

With the decline of family values in overdeveloped nations being blamed on video games (mindless entertainment) and single mothers (mindless bodies or absent fathers), the electronic classroom presents both a highly individualized and yet centralized communication system—a centre without margins. Students are connected to Washington D.C., to the centre of global power while working at their own pace. The electronic class has all the attributes of the mythological family and the **Nation-State**: assuring personal freedom, equality, active democratic participation and, at the same time, the guarantee of social cohesion.

The technological figure of woman, as a history of the cinema foretells, brings to mechanical/electronic images the authority of origin, the certainty of social reproduction and continuity. AT&T's computer generated teachers are all about disavowal; they guarantee that very notion of history and origin that computer generation threatens to annihilate. History, in this instance—"Where does Jazz come from"—is tied to reproduction; it is not something 'made and re-made' as Cornel West would put it, but something that is open for business, there to be accessed and reproduced. Indeed, West has warned against a separatist identity politic that refuses the interconnectedness of all histories and identities precisely because this politic cannot recognize where power is located. The danger in categorical identities is that these are locked into the discourses of liberal individualism, they can be made to mirror and can be contained by market forces which, by virtue of capital's intrinsic logic, work against political solidarity.³

The image of solidarity that prevails in the New Information Order has nothing to do with history. Rather, it is tied to the geography of global power, an image of power that disavows power through the most feminine of all images: Mother Earth.

GLOBALISA-TION

Geography is global. Its history is the history of global culture situated in and around 1492 with the discovery of the Americas and the Spanish Inquisition. Geography must be understood, then, in relation to the colonization of spaces and peoples, in terms of imperialism, capitalism and a history of Christian carnage. We should recall that the technologies essential to the Spanish Inquisition were not only elaborate devices of torture and death by fire, but those binding structures of representation

and meaning provided by maps and dictionaries. The infamous Inquisitor's Dictionary (*Repertorium Inquisitorium*) written in 1494, provided the words that empowered the tribunals, the 308 words used to detect heresy, and determine a deviance written, for the most part, on the bodies of Jews, Moors, women and Native Peoples of the Americas. The limited vocabulary of the Inquisitor's Dictionary, served, in effect, to limit biblical interpretation; it functioned to map the world and fix its meanings and histories. It provided the objective grammar by which to live and through which to construct hierarchies of difference and degrees of deviance. In this sense, interactive technologies have a long history.

In *Cultural Imperialism*, John Tomlinson maintains that the globalisation we are currently experiencing must be distinguished from earlier forms of imperialism. In the context of the "spread" of cultural modernity, the language of cultural domination and imposition is no longer appropriate. For Tomlinson, globalisation is far less coherent or culturally directed than imperialism:

For all that is ambiguous between economic and political senses, the idea of imperialism contains, at least, the notion of a purposeful project: the intended spread of a social system from one centre of power across the globe. The idea of 'globalisation' suggests interconnection and interdependency of all global areas which happens in a far less purposeful way...and which function to weaken all nation states—including the economically powerful ones—the imperialist powers of a previous era.⁴

Tomlinson's insights are useful: capitalist modernity cannot simply be reduced to a technological imperative of domination. In fact, very much like Raymond Williams on television, Tomlinson resists formalist or functionalist accounts of technology and culture as tools for socio-economic colonization. Rather, cultural technologies must be understood within their specific contexts of production, reception and use.

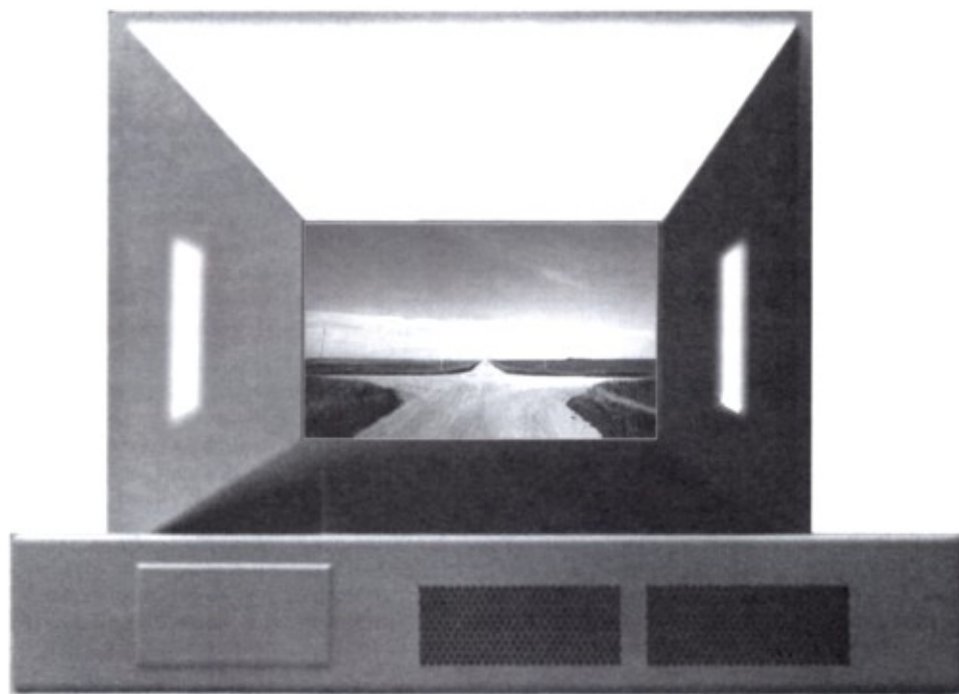
For many, the web of computer networks called the Internet—through which the electronic classroom will be made to order—is the embodiment of the ambiguous status of global cultural modernity. The Internet allows communication between users

1. Mary Ann Doane, *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. Mary Jacobus (New York: Routledge, 1990), 172.

2. Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 248.

3. Cornel West, *Empire and Europe* forthcoming in *Public*, 10, 1994.

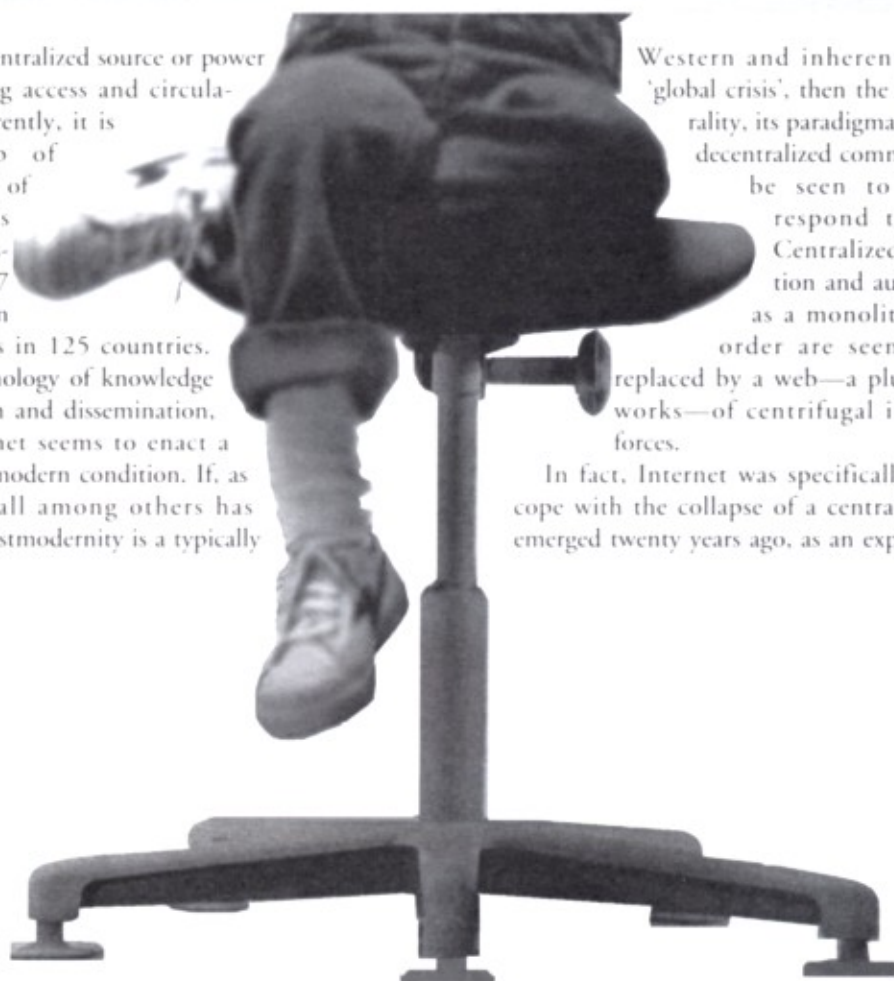
4. John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 175.



with no centralized source or power controlling access and circulation. Currently, it is made up of thousands of networks encompassing 1.7 million computers in 125 countries. As a technology of knowledge production and dissemination, the Internet seems to enact a truly postmodern condition. If, as Stuart Hall among others has argued, postmodernity is a typically

Western and inherently American 'global crisis', then the Internet's plurality, its paradigmatic structure of decentralized communication can be seen to reflect and respond to the crisis. Centralized communication and authority as well as a monolithic historical order are seemingly being replaced by a web—a plurality of networks—of centrifugal informational forces.

In fact, Internet was specifically designed to cope with the collapse of a central authority. It emerged twenty years ago, as an experimental net-



work created by the U.S. Defense Department to support weapons research—in particular, research concerning the construction of networks that could withstand partial outages (like nuclear war) and continue to function. The idea behind the Internet is that any portion of the network can disappear and messages will still circulate between computers. Contrived to withstand an attack on its centre, then, it is an information system that cannot be dislocated precisely because its centre cannot be located. In its early incarnation as a military technology, this decentralization of intelligence was merely structural and in fact was intended to lay the foundations for an even more sophisticated information infrastructure. Yet at present the Internet cannot be controlled or monitored in any coherent manner.

Undoubtably, it is becoming more difficult to locate institutional assumptions and structures of power in the age of information. The actual source of a transmission, technology or service is blurred across national, regional and institutional boundaries, across public and private spaces, within the decentred economy of the 'user'. It is precisely such an economy that may provide a space for resistance, for the dissemination of a diversity of voices and hence, for the creation of what Rita Felski has called a "counter-public sphere".⁵

At present, Internet is available through institutional channels (universities, government agencies, community organizations etc.) and networking has been subsidized through the U.S. National Science Foundation which is in the process of moving the Internet over to the private sector. During this period of transition from the public to private sector, some are taking advantage of the unmonitored exchanges and networks that are now possible on the Internet. Alternative information and political networks, the cyberfeminist movement (among them VNS Matrix in Australia, ADA in Canada and TRASH in the U.S.), a vast array of free electronic interdisciplinary cultural magazines and fanzines, not to mention the imaginative parameters of the cyberporn circuit are only just beginning to suggest the uses to which new compound media can be put. Yet the recent mergings of cable and telephone companies across North America may soon severely curtail these activities. Paving the way for the new information/entertainment home 'supermarket', many companies plan to provide over 500 channels as well as myriad services through integrated media (digital voice, data and video). Again: the impetus is always about democracy, about providing more peo-

ple with more information and, as McLuhan predicted, it reflects the progressive fusion of education and marketing.

Discourses of access and participation often work to obscure the institutional conditions and the political limits of coming to voice. The question is not only access—who is being given access to information, at what cost and for what purposes—but also the political economy, institutional structures and communication imperialism that are shaping access. Clearly new models are needed to think about the decentralized patterns of dissemination enabled by the new global technologies. It remains to be seen whether interactivity will come to signify the production of real cultural diversity or simply more highly atomized channels of distribution.

Canada's techno-lust, its desire (paradoxically nationalist) to be part of the New Information Order by acquiring communications hardware (satellites and cable) without considering content, makes us particularly vulnerable to the latter. Moreover, the CRTC's recent claims that it will not attempt to regulate the influx of American cultural product into Canada via the 500 channel superhighway is scandalous and needs to be actively contested. If we have learned anything from the CRTC's relationship with the cable companies in the seventies and eighties, it is that we cannot rely upon the State to ensure the exhibition of indigenous cultural production. Certainly, the image of the information superhighway is a false one. Its technological determinism invokes the inevitability of a culture always already beyond the scope of the present. It is precisely the technocratic abstraction of those 500 channels working in tandem to construct a monstrous superhighway that cultural work must seek to materialize.

Despite AT&T's rhetoric of access, the New Information Order will intensify class divisions—the services available through its superhighways will be expensive. It is doubtful that innercity schools already suffering severe financial cut-backs will get access to the latest telematic gear. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether these new technologies will actually teach people how to write or merely reproduce the old ways of reading.

⁵ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989) 164-171.

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FESTIVAL OF FESTIVALS, SEPTEMBER, 1993



What's Love, Science and Singing Got to Do With IT?

A follow-up to his 1991 searing musical hit on anti-gay violence, *The Making of "Monsters"*, John Greyson's *Zero Patience* offers, once again, a racy postmodern melange of camp, politics and (even) cultural theory. This time Greyson ups the stakes, takes on the feature length format and delivers a spirited musical mediation on—of all topics—AIDS, its ill-considered scientific reception and, most significantly, its egregious media representation. The word "on" is somewhat of a misnomer, as Greyson, historically, has tended to sidle up to an issue or an accepted truism, then circle back to playfully illustrate its tenuous foundations, questioning the certainty of "knowing" in the first place. No armchair activist, Greyson

adopts deconstructive wit as a weapon against the commonplace, homophobia and policing of gay sexuality in particular, and regulation and oppression in general. *Zero Patience* offers a filmic take on how the AIDS "crisis" precipitated what has been deftly named an "epidemic of signification". Yet Greyson's signature—comic irreverence laced with political savvy and methodological smarts—serves his subject well. The film's range, its rapid shifts of tone from one discrete element to another—in short, its genre-busting pace, from musical to love story to lessons on bad science—suggests that a bent perspective pays off.

John Greyson is a household name in both Toronto's video art and in its gay activist scenes—an *enfant terrible* video activist since the late seventies. Greyson has helped shape Canada's version of what has come to be known as Gay, or more recently, Queer cinema. Historical figures familiar to the gay lexicon populate Greyson's oeuvre. Some might call it encyclopedic autodidacticism, others might label it a form of insider's trivial pursuit, a "whose who" of gay history. Greyson is never straight, his work always comments on the act of representation itself, breaking down distinctions, confounding categories between documentary and drama, between biography and fabrication, between past and present, invariably to a political end. *Urinal* (1988), a risky video/film first feature hybrid is strewn with parodic fictions, some lived, others borrowed from the page. Dead gay artists, some closeted, some not, from near and afar, are featured in this re-visioning of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Sergei Eisenstein, Mishima, Langston Hughes and Toronto lesbian artists Frances Loring and Florence Wyle, among others, are set in relief against the central subject—the politics of public sex—while arguing among themselves the possibility of representation. Like most Greyson projects, however, *Urinal*'s conception grew out of the local: Toronto's infamous 1981 bathhouse raids, where three hundred men were arrested in one night.

Licence reigns supreme, dating back to Greyson's earliest video art. The titles themselves reveal an integral play on and with language, with dead "heroes" returning with new mannerisms who irrevocably tease out the relations between gay subculture and mainstream social values. Popular culture here is used against itself, appropriated and reworked, to signify counter meanings. From *The Perils of Pedagogy* (1984), where Lindsay Anderson's *If* rubs up against *To Sir with Love*, to *Kipling Meets the Cowboys* (1985), where Rudyard Kipling, on a Canadian tour, meets up with John Wayne in *Red River*, to *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1986), a rumination on homophobia where Moscow's gay subculture is intercut with the mass media's Rock Hudson Aids hysteria, mixed with Rock's loaded asides in *Ice Station Zebra* to *You Taste American* (1986), where Michelle Foucault meets Tennessee Williams in *Orilia*, only to get busted in an illicit washroom sex operation, to *The Pink Pimpernel* (1988), where not only Jean Genet, as well as Norman McLaren and Claude Jutra in separate musical tableaux say: "Live out your fantasies with safer sex" are just a few of many examples, but you get the picture.

As early as 1980, with works like *The First Draft* and *Breathing Through Opposing Nostrils*, 1983, with Vito Russo, author of *The Celluloid Closet*, Greyson illustrates an adroit sensitivity towards the media. At the same time, however, these early works do not blindly celebrate marginal practices; the naive supposition that alternative media can counter dominant culture is often parodied. The necessity to move beyond merely the oppositional

gradually comes into expression. *Breathing Through Opposing Nostrils*, for example, betrays a beginning sensitivity to "difference within," in this case how paranoia can undermine coalitions within and beyond the gay community.

The Ads Epidemic (1987) is a five minute prototype for future work. An insta-blend of rock video and safe sex promo, this wackily inventive tape plays on Thomas Mann and Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice*. Part literal, mostly aberration, Tadzio convinces Aschenbach to replace Dread of sex with safe-sex. *The Making of "Monsters"* neatly follows, test performing strategies played out in *Zero Patience*. The comic musical genre binds these three works, while maintaining a definitive nod to popular culture. Adding both facts and digression, singing makes space for the unacceptable—what straights might consider "obscene." Just when the narrative threatens to move into a lecture mode or the hyperbolic, we veer off into often biting funny numbers.

The Making of "Monsters" takes as its starting point the fact that between 1983 and 1985 four Toronto teachers were murdered by anti-gay assailants. Focusing on one particular incident, the murder of Joe McQuire, *Monsters* is presented not in somber reenactment of a horrible deed but a comic musical hybrid that insists on uncovering—in glorious technicolour—reasons why such acts are committed. With Georg Lukas as producer and Bertolt Brecht (played by a catfish) as director of a documentary on the actual event, they provide competing definitions of aesthetics, realism in particular, to help structure the film while pumping up the fun. Framing the project as a CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) production further crosses the limits of official culture, adding both hilarity and a touch of bitter home-felt irony. Part critique of straight masculinity, part affirmative pay-back, excesses abound. Numbers such as "I Hate Straights",¹ sung to the tune of Kurt Weill's "Mack the Knife" are right on the mark:

Straights are stupid
Straights are boring
They get upset when we come out
They prefer us in our closets disenfranchised without clout
Homophobia is an equalizer, it increases with our pride
Calculate the ebb and flow dear
It decreases when we hide

From the early video work to *Zero Patience*, a camp aesthetic, or what some might call a queer mode of production, is decidedly evident. Evolving out of the closet, camp has become a style, a discourse where slippage is the operative term, played out in the relationship between being and appearance. The recent success of works by boys like Tom Kalin, Todd Haynes and Gregg Araki in the South can be partially attributed to such a tension. (The paucity of comparable big screen girl stuff has been increasingly contested; this difference, I think, brings the

disparity lurking under the designation "queer" more sharply into focus.)² Ruby Rich has aptly named this heady surge of new queer film and video "Homo Pomo,"³ noting a common style. Reminiscent of the pervasive rigour of England's late Stuart Marshall's film and video work, while decidedly informed by the local—the gay camp of General Idea and video artist Colin Campbell in particular—this eightie's video badboy has crossed over from gallery outback to deliver full-frontal feature with his moxie intact. Driven more by provocation than dramatic convention, *Zero Patience* neatly falls under the rubric of "the cinema of ideas"; heavy on the side of counter cinema, thought-provoking but hardly a treatise, it remains smart fun. Although intentionally didactic, *Zero* is neither impenetrable nor interminable. Long on spectacle, short on narrative drive and character identification, *Zero* is replete with subtexts galore. But its cheeky disregard for the ABC's of plot would explode any scriptwriting software program or send Robert McKee types running for cover. Its excesses, its conceits, its flagrant absurdities, (and its dead-on scrutiny) are, however, its strength.

The film's title, *Zero Patience*, cleverly tropes on the real "patient zero," a reference to Gaëtan Dugas, a Québécois Air Canada flight attendant who allegedly brought the AIDS epidemic to North America and died in 1984. He was singled out and scapegoated by a scientific establishment on the lookout for origin and blame. Although the truth of this "case" has been conclusively retracted, the popular imaginary doggedly holds onto this myth.⁴ The title literally inverts Patient Zero's label while signalling the film's overall strategy, to re-signify this "epidemic of blame" that has been unleashed by the AIDS crisis.

Zero "appears" from the dead to stop the nonsense and save his name. Sir Richard Burton, a notorious nineteenth century sexologist (and orientalist) whom Edward Said has aptly cited as "Tricky Dick," is the second major "character" with an extended lifespan. His contributions in earlier lives include translating *The Arabian Nights* (hence the film's opening Schérazade number) and promoting the "theory" that temperate climates produce homosexual behaviour, whereas colder climates, such as in Northern Europe and England, in particular, do not encourage sodomy. (This projection can perhaps account for the nineteenth century rush to exotic locales, the excuse for every privileged good boy's Grand Tour). Part dandy, part amateur scientist, with a decided tendency toward the prolix, Burton performs his taxidermist duties by day at the Museum of Contagions, while dabbling in bad science and sleuthing by night. When the plague rat exhibit is cancelled because of budget cuts, like a good scientist (and curator) he seizes upon opportunity and features Patient Zero in an AIDS display instead. The sensationalist appeal of this most immediate epidemic are not lost to him.

George, a black school teacher and former buddy of Zero's, is the film's central PWA (person with aids),

adding a human touch (and tear), the flip side to the fantasy and fun. A former buddy of Zero's, George's daily lived struggle with contradiction and false information offers an all too realist element. The tension, however, exceeds the fixity of a crude binary; George is no victim—he gets to sing. Pharmaceutical companies, as well as AIDS activism meet his scrutinizing gaze. (Auto-critique such as this, targeted at one's own community, is indeed courageous, and, I think, one of the film's many strengths). The recurring musical number "I know I know I know that I don't know" is George's theme (and swan) song but it also provides the film's haunting, residual message. These words encourage a fluidity, an openness, that is unprecedented in mainstream films on the subject to date.

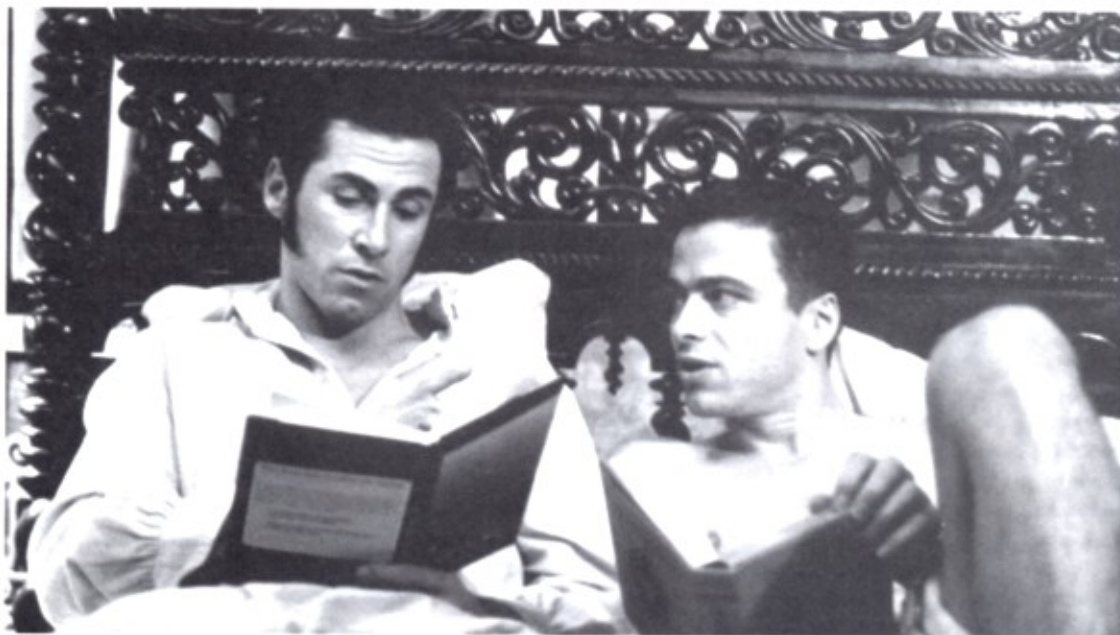
Burton sets off on a fact-finding mission, meets up with Zero's mum, steals his diary, and begins his quest. With camcorder in hand, he blazes his way into Zero's life: the friends, the lovers, ACT UP meetings, and the bath houses. On the way Burton not only receives an AIDS education, but he learns human frailty and courage. Zero agrees to assist him with his project, and Burton gradually reassesses centuries of bias. We end in a shared musical epiphany in the House of Contagions, where "diseased," fixed figures from various historical dioramas literally "morph" into productive healthy roles. The Typhoid Mary and Tuskegee dioramas, for example, transform into Fanny Wright (a nineteenth century feminist and activist for People's Health Movement) and George Washington Carver (a renowned black botanist and teacher), respectively.

² R. Bruce Brasell situates the anti-assimilationist nature of this number as an example of queer nationalism's performative play in his insightful paper "Queer Nationalism and the Musical Bag Bashing of John Greyson's *The Making of Monsters* delivered at the 15th Annual Ohio Film Conference: National Cinema Revisited, 1993.

³ The mapping of paradigms that have been instrumental for the theorization of gender and race onto queer representation—with the swift emergence and institutionalization of queer theory—is a practice that needs further scrutiny. The way in which "emerging" marginal but less capitalized upon practices diffuse and erase (often unwittingly) preceding "minoritarian" discourse is of seminal interest. Some queer theory's stress on subjectivity and its lack of consideration for specific and lesbian histories, for example, the downside of what Chantale Nadeau has called "queermania," is at issue. A lot is at stake with the term queer and although I support and celebrate its emergence it seems that attacks against its occlusion of feminism do seem warranted. In particular, the specific claims of queer film theory need be more fully interrogated. The fact that a shared lexicon is often invoked to characterize feminist, Black British and queer cinema, spanning some twenty years, is perhaps symptomatic of this need.

⁴ Rich writes: "...there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure." See *New Queer Cinema*, "Sight and Sound 2-5 (1992), p. 32.

⁵ Randy Shilt's recent production *And The Band Played On* is a case in point. Although the film successfully "outs" the health industry its portrayal of "Zero" as an oblivious sex machine "carrier" is what *Zero Patience* precisely undoes.



The host of stock "characters" are entertainingly informative, but hardly fleshed out in a conventional sense—lots of glorious moments but few lives. Like the AIDS virus itself, *Zero Patience* transforms itself so often that the pace and structure prohibits attachment to any particular character. In typical style, Greyson takes his pick from the past, many of the players are shadowy historical figures. Sidestepping the chore of creating characters, "real" personages are simply put back to work. Embodying ideas, these "readymades" speak and/or sing, in this case, a plethora of discourses: medical, scientific and romantic. In spite of the level of artifice, we are, surprisingly, still drawn in, we even cry. Tearing pleasure out of identification, *Zero* offers a different form of pleasure: visual sumptuousness mixed with fodder for the brain, lots to watch and ponder—in unusual combinations. Like his predecessors, Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, Jean Genet, Greyson employs wit, irony and artifice as weapons against straight modes of production. Pushing it, like having AIDS activist Michael Callen, in drag, as Ms. HIV, with the Clichettes playing competing viruses, undoubtedly contributes to what Douglas Crimp has called "a war of representation."

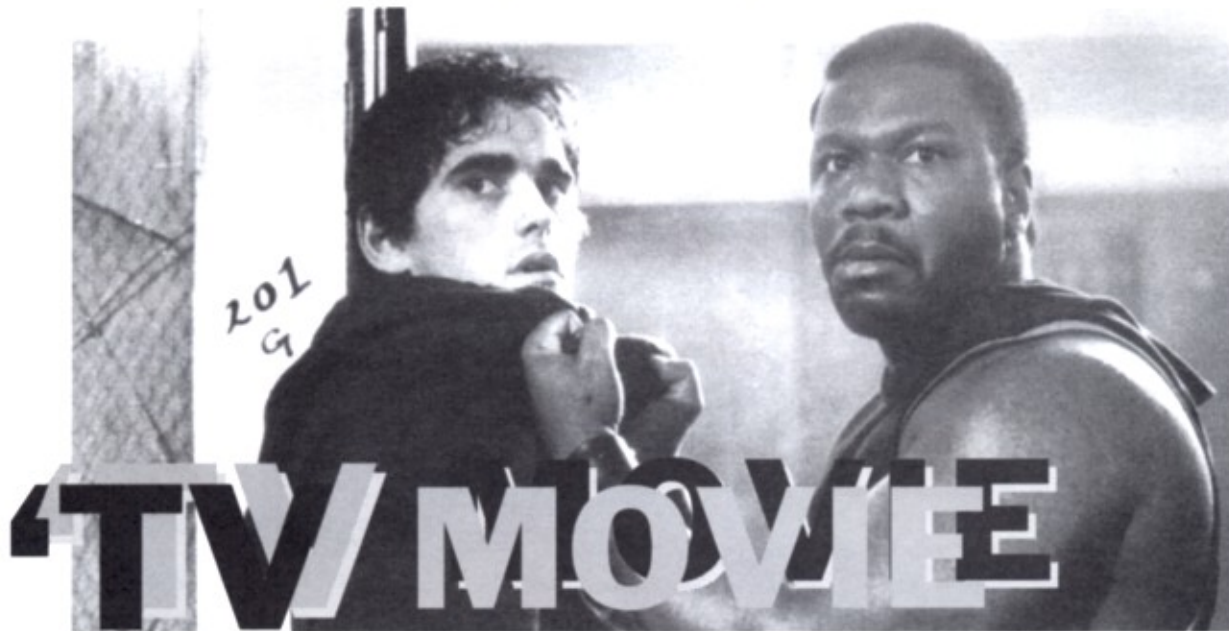
Eschewing one-dimensionality, *Zero Patience* works on a number of levels. Its flair for excess, its superb art direction, does not, however, cancel out its message. Unlike some contemporary Queer work, *Zero* does not fall into the trap of single issue identity politics. Artistry lies in its visual flair, witty choreographed numbers, and making

the right connections. Not always slick, sometimes bumpy, *Zero Patience* remains overarchingly Foucauldian, suggesting the underlying socio-cultural mechanisms that produce AIDS stereotypes. Correspondences between nineteenth century positivist science and present popular bio-medical discourses on AIDS are eloquently rendered. The scope of the "mismeasure" of man, from monitoring hysterics, to measuring the genitalia of Africans, to twentieth century realizations in the medical exam room, in the class room, on the news page, is brought home. Juggling critiques of imperialism and empiricism—equivalences between instruments of surveillance, the microscope, the camera—with the hermeneutics of a murder mystery, who and what killed Patient Zero, *Zero Patience* teaches us that the inexorable drive for truth can kill us.

Constant metamorphoses, epitomized in the exquisite choreographed bodies in motion, forms corporeal resistance against the oppressive weight of definition. Greyson takes AIDS media sensationalism and turns it on its head through a unique production of desire and discursivity. Although intended immediately for a gay audience, *Zero Patience* crosses over and addresses all. A line from *The Making of "Monsters"* to me personifies Greyson's practice: "I refuse to shoot reactionary garbage, I refuse to make pabulum for the self-satisfied middle-class."

Kass Banning

FESTIVAL OF FESTIVALS, SEPTEMBER, 1993



SYNDROME' AND CONTEMPORARY FILM

In the seventies, I used to watch a T.V. show called 'Lou Grant', which was a spin-off from the more popular *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Its main character, played by Ed Asner, was a newspaper editor, and the weekly plots derived from both personal and professional situations. The individual episodes were constructed in such a way that, by the show's end, all the plot threads had dovetailed into a single thematic concern. In fact, one of the particular delights in watching 'Lou Grant' was that it became a kind of game for me and my husband to see who would be the first to identify just what the 'issue of the week' was. Although we knew ahead of time of the intrusion of a political message into the T.V. text, the shows were written with such a high level of complexity and maturity (and there was so little else of substance available on network television) that we applauded the screenwriters' efforts to inject meaning into the evening's entertainment.

In the nineties, I have become increasingly aware of a certain phenomenon manifested not only on television, but now also on the cinema screen, a phenomenon in which the central motivating cause of the narrative is a sociopolitical issue of the week, or month, or year. Television at its

worst homogenizes all narratives and all differences into one bland blend aimed, in an interestingly political way, at the lowest level of comprehension. In order to get its point across, all complexity and contradiction must be jettisoned by the narrative for the unambiguous statement which teaches the masses about the horrors of modern life. Unfortunately, what is jettisoned at the same time is any claim to art and its transformative powers. Pedagogy precedes, or in fact, supersedes, aesthetic practice. The extreme result of this is to be found in the 'TV movie of the week' (unless, of course, it's dealing with a docudrama recreation of some true life sensationalist scandal).

I was confronted with this phenomenon at the Festival of Festivals in September. Perhaps I chose my films infelicitously, but what I noticed was the infiltration of 'TV movie syndrome' into contemporary film production. Three films in particular stand out, admittedly, for different reasons. The most blatant example was *The Saint of Fort Washinton*, a mainstream film I had selected because of its director, Tim Hunter. Hunter's earlier works include *River's Edge* (1987, director) and *Over the Edge* (1979, co-writer), neither of which may be described as simple-minded even though they both

are concerned with the much worked-over theme of adolescent angst. *'The Saint of Fort Washinton'*, on the other hand, deals with a decidedly current problem, the plight of the homeless in New York City, but in such a flat and unilinear way that the outcome is as inevitable and as predictable as that of any TV movie. The charm of Matt Dillon's character, Matthew, a schizophrenic ex-photographer thrown upon his own scant resources, is wasted in a film which seems to want to inject an alleviating supernatural touch (the schizophrenic as 'saint thau-maturge') into the depressing narrative, but then, incomprehensibly, veers back to canonical mediocrity. There's no denying that the film does sensitize its audience to the unbearable circumstances in which the homeless find themselves; however, that's all it does. I feel a film not only can but should offer more than a single declarative statement.

Jon Jost's *The Bed You Sleep In* is definitely not a TV movie, stylistically, at any rate. Never having seen any of his previous films, I was looking forward to what I had been told was more of a European sensibility: long, slow-moving scenes, beautifully shot, where not much happens. Having been filmically raised on early Antonioni and Bertolucci, thereby acquiring a taste for long, slow-moving films, I figured that Jost was a filmmaker whose work I should see. *The Bed You Sleep In* is a 117 minute long film which lingers lovingly over its images. Set in a small lumber mill town in Oregon, it (coincidentally?) replays many of the memorable shots from the opening credit sequence of *Twin Peaks*: a sawmill, logs being sawn, pine-studded hills, etc., the difference being that each filmic image is held for a considerably longer time than its TV counterpart. Ray, played by Tom Blair, owns the lumber mill. He and his partner are having financial difficulties due to the intervention of the environmental protection agency which won't allow them to cut the wood they need to survive as a viable operation. Although there is an epilogue at the film's end which details the destruction of the lumber industry in Oregon as a direct result of the government's protection of endangered wildlife, this is not what the film is about; in fact the epilogue comes as a bit of a surprise, since not much is made of Ray's business problems throughout the rest of the film. After many panoramic sweeps through the lumber mill, its environs, and a fishing spot where Ray goes to be with nature, (and at least an hour into the film), we discover that Ray's

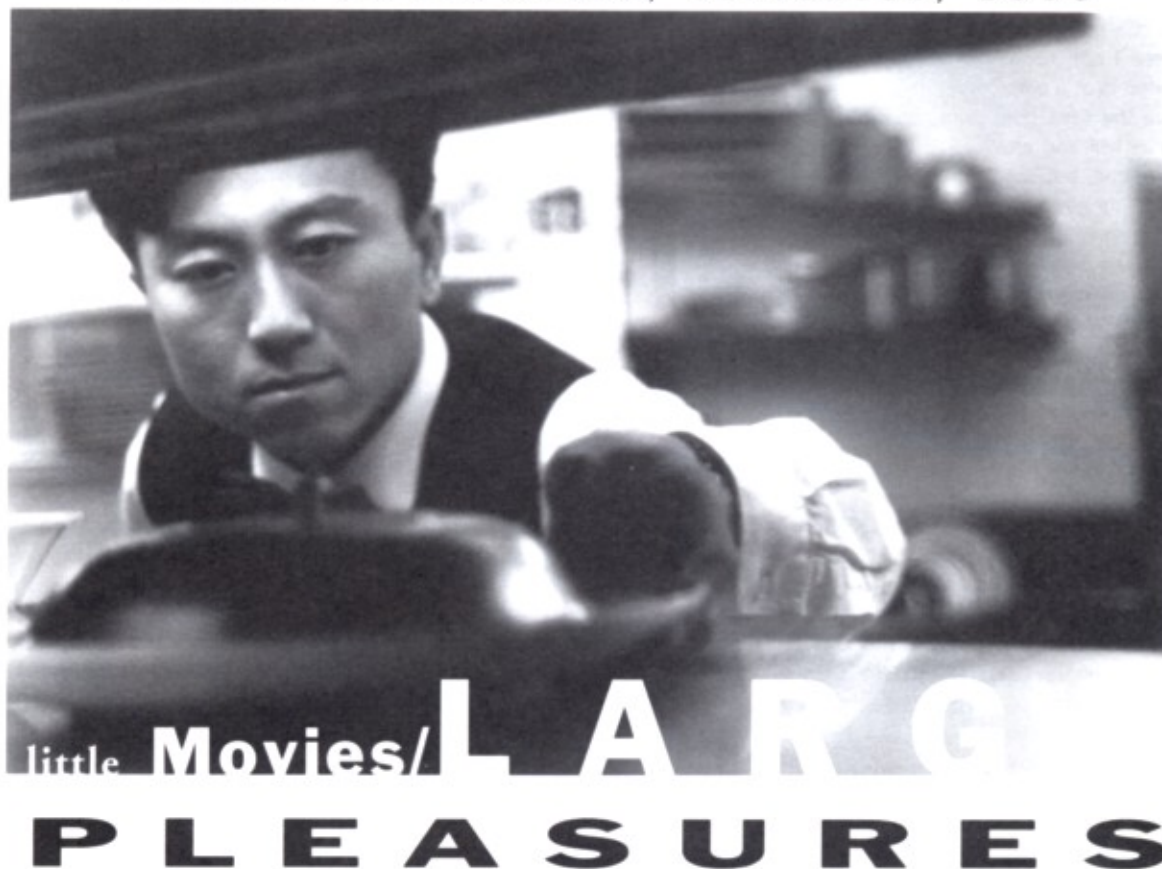
(second) wife has received a letter from his daughter (her stepdaughter), away at college, which accuses Ray of incestuous behaviour. And that's it. From there, on to the simplistic moral trajectory of a TV movie. Ray denies it; his wife threatens to leave him; his daughter commits suicide; his wife commits suicide; he commits suicide. End of movie.

A considerably more engaging film about the same subject matter (incest, that is), is Aline Isserman's *Shadow of Doubt* (*L'ombre du doute*), which unfortunately has in all likelihood as little chance of getting distributed as the Jost film. Unlike the two American films, *Shadow of Doubt* does not set up a simple moral tale whose unfolding provides the single purpose of the narrative. The film's protagonist, a young girl, visibly withdrawn and anorexic, is encouraged by a sympathetic teacher to publicly accuse her father of incest. She backs down, however, when confronted by a parental 'united front' and general disapproval of her behavior. A persistent social worker befriends the teenager, and, gradually, the accusation is brought forth once again. Near the end of the film, the father, in prison awaiting trial, watches a TV news report concerning the treatment of French hostages by a military dictator. For this scene, Isserman uses a slightly modified simulation of the widely-seen film footage of Saddam Hussein tousling the hair of a young lad in an apparently friendly gesture which however, read through the power of his position, projects, nevertheless, its underlying menacing intent. Up to this point in the film, the father has denied any wrongdoing, and in fact, we the viewers have not seen him do anything, either. But at this moment, watching the powerful man and the helpless child, he bursts into tears in an epiphany of remembrance of his own abused childhood. This is one of the few uses of an address to a collective TV unconscious that I have witnessed, where one's historical presence as a TV viewer informs the fictional moment with a level of meaning beyond the usual kitsch.

Another thing that makes this film different is that its theme is not delivered with a hammer blow. Each member of the family has his or her own story to tell, their own reasons for exhibited behavior. Not that they are condoned or even pardoned by the film's moral narrative; they are just not simple plot devices required to move the story along.

Susan Morrison

FESTIVAL OF FESTIVALS, SEPTEMBER, 1993



little Movies/LARGE PLEASURES

'Serious' criticism today appears to have lost touch completely with the fact that one of the primary functions of art has been to give pleasure. Even when the critic evidently admires the film s/he is discussing, the reason for the admiration appears to be a high-minded and severe appreciation of the work's assumed political efficacy rather than a delight in the 'frivolous' manifestations of the play of creativity or the expression of a fine sensibility. A work of art cannot change the world: not, that is, in the direct and unmediated way that seems to be envisaged. In protest against this contemporary perversity, I have chosen to discuss films from the Toronto festival that have given me particular pleasure, of each of which I can say, quite simply, as no one appears willing to say any more, 'I love this movie.'

Combination Platter, *Grief* and *The Wedding Banquet* have various features overlapping or in common: all are remarkably assured and accomplished first features, made on very low budgets; all can be categorized as 'ensemble' films, in which the spectator's interest and sympathies are divided among a number of divergent yet interacting characters rather than focused upon a particular protagonist or single narrative line. This is most obvi-

ous in *Combination Platter* and *Grief*, which have as their subject a particular business enterprise and workplace (Chinese restaurant, independent television station) and the lives of the people who work there, but a similar principle of divided sympathies operates in *The Wedding Banquet*, where our concern is as much for the feelings of the elderly parents and the bride in the marriage of convenience as for the future of the central romantic couple. A leading plot-thread of both *Combination Platter* and *The Wedding Banquet* is the attempt of an Asian immigrant to secure that elusive object of desire the green card; *The Wedding Banquet* and *Grief* are both centred on gay characters. Finally, all three of the films are similar in their apparent lack of high ambition (as that term tends to be generally understood) or solemn aspiration: all are frankly audience-pleasers, innocent of Big Themes or Major Statements, or of the desire to provoke deep disturbance or anguish in the viewer. One may also note that all three are, by contemporary standards, conspicuously short on violence or explicit sex scenes.

They are films that tend to get lost among the festival 'giants,' yet they seem to me ideal festival films. Who, after a day's viewing of two, three or even four films, can

possibly do justice to intellectually and emotionally taxing (and extremely long) works like *The Puppet Master* or *Farewell, My Concubine?* - these films that demand to be seen on their own, when one is fresh and one's head is clear. I don't mean that it is unnecessary to be alert for the three I am discussing - rather that the alertness demanded is of a different order, a natural product of the pleasure the films give rather than, to whatever degree, an act of will and effort. One can listen to Mozart for hours on end, but one Mahler symphony a day is surely enough. This does not mean that Mahler is the greater composer, only that what is at issue here is the distinction between different kinds of artistic achievement. Prior to the nineteenth century, it seems to have been the general understanding that art should be immediately pleasurable or 'entertaining.'

The musical analogy does not strike me as altogether incongruous. *Combination Platter* and *The Wedding Banquet*, especially, could aptly be described as 'Mozartian' in their emotional delicacy and complexity, and they are also 'entertaining,' like a Mozart divertimento, with a similar play of familiarity and surprise. (Talking of ambition, isn't this a rare enough feat these days?). *The Wedding Banquet* was somewhat misrepresented in the press: I'd been led to expect a hilarious farce, a 'jolly romp,' and it took me some time to adjust to what the film actually offers. Certainly it is very funny, but the comedy is consistently counterpointed by the sense of pain experienced at various points by all the five main characters. Similarly, in *Combination Platter*, Tony Chan sensitively negotiates, in the movement from character to character, subtle shifts of feeling, emotional adjustments and readjustments: the film would bear intensive analysis of its play on viewer-positioning. As Bruno Walter said of Mozart, 'the expression changes in every bar.' Communication emerges as a unifying theme: problems of language among the Chinese themselves (Cantonese/Mandarin), but especially between Asians and Caucasians. The film can be read as playing, on this, an intricate set of variations: the integration of the amiable Caucasian busboy in the worker's group; the charming, funny, precarious, unpredictable romance between a young Caucasian male customer and his aggressively feminist Asian woman friend; above all, the relationship between the central Chinese waiter and the Caucasian woman he reluctantly courts as the possible means to a green card, the relationship abruptly ended when his innate honesty compels him to confess his motive just at the point where the barriers are beginning to break down and a genuine intimacy seems possible.

The Wedding Banquet is not without its narrative weaknesses: its New York gay couple appear (leaving aside a perfunctory exchange early in the film which is never followed up) curiously to lack friends and acquaintances in the gay community; the denouement depends upon the sudden revelation that a character who had no evident reason to conceal the fact understands and

speaks English. But these are trivial objections beside its achievement, the sustaining of an overall comedic tone that never trivializes the emotional undercurrents: the pain of the woman who is in love with the Chinese-American gay man she marries ostensibly for convenience (and later carries his child); the pain of the Caucasian lover (the closest the film comes to offering a moral centre) repeatedly forced into subterfuge and dishonesty quite against his nature; the continuous unease generated by the presence of the Chinese parents from whom the 'secret' must be kept.

The Wedding Banquet has had a wide release (at least within the 'art-house' circuit) and considerable popular success; *Combination Platter* (surely a film with immense popular potential) has at least been permitted a modestly successful run in New York. *Grief*, which won the audience award at the San Francisco gay and lesbian film festival, has not (as far as I know) yet received any release beyond the festival circuit. This is the simple reason why I cannot write on it with any confidence: I have not been able to re-see it. My lingering impression (for what it's worth) is that its effects are broader, its emotional shifts more obvious, and more obviously manipulative; and it seems more clearly targeted toward a gay audience than *The Wedding Banquet* (the perfect 'crossover' movie). Yet it seems extraordinary that it has not had a run in every city that boasts a definable gay community, and its mix of straight and gay character, together with its irresistible energy (I laughed and cried my way through it), should ensure it a reasonable wide box-office appeal, with proper promotion. It shares with *Combination Platter* and *The Wedding Banquet*, with its continuous shifts in viewer involvement and sympathy, an authentic goodwill and generosity of spirit, a readiness to understand and accept a range of positions, that I find rare in today's popular cinema and more politically potent than the majority of 'correct' cinematic manifestoes. What I take away from these films, ultimately, is a sense of community and friendship with filmmakers of whom I have no personal knowledge and whom I shall probably never meet. Isn't that one of art's highest pleasure?

Robin Wood

FESTIVAL OF FESTIVALS, SEPTEMBER, 1993



the Accompanist: *the game and the rules*

The 1993 Toronto Film Festival screened a remarkable number of diverse, interesting new works, and as common during these events, a select few are promoted by critics and press while a great many important films slip by without attention. Among these is Claude Miller's *The Accompanist*. In part this neglect can be attributed to the fact that the film is not controversial, of the moment, trendy or particularly correct or incorrect in its portrayal of

its subject matter. It is set in France, during the WWII period, and can be described as a melodrama which pays homage in a creative way to Renoir, specifically *La Règle du jeu*. The film is eloquent, nuanced and poignant and Miller's direction is accomplished in its precision and delicacy but it does not offer instant gratification by showcasing topical issues like abuse in the family or gender and sexual ambiguity, nor is it an assault on narrative realism.

Yet, *The Accompanist* is political in its investigation of identity, gender, class and moral commitment on both the individual and wider national levels, and it addresses the complexities of the characters' positions with generosity and respect. Our concern is that a film like *The Accompanist* deserves both critical attention and an audience. Its total lack of recognition locally recommends that criteria for critical evaluation needs to be questioned and confronted.

The Accompanist is centered upon Sophie Vasseur/Romane Bohringer, a young 'petite bourgeoisie' struggling to live in occupied France during the winter of 1942-43, who applies for a job as a piano accompanist to a popular soprano Irene Brice/Elena Safonova. One of the opening scenes, in which Sophie first meets Irene Brice and her husband Charles/Richard Bohringer, visually and thematically encapsulates the melodramatic essence of the narrative. Sophie emerges from the grey drab outside social world and stumbles into the softly lit heightened opulence of the Brice's milieu. The Brices, profiting from the collaborationist ruling government, are indulging in a luxurious after theatre dinner party at a restaurant. The camera lingers over the exquisitely prepared and extravagant feast and the glamorous elegance of Irene's costume and those of her guests. Sophie's introduction to this world is shocking in its contrast to the social world from which she's emerged; she is invited to partake of the delicacies and, unable to digest either her food or the vision, takes ill.

The following day Sophie returns for an interview at the Brices' apartment and quickly becomes fascinated with the intrigues and overwhelming beauty and luxury of their lives. She is hired with the understanding that her commitment to Irene will be all-encompassing. As in Renoir's *La Règle du jeu*, *The Accompanist* documents a class existence that will not survive the war and the film analyses the process of its impending disintegration. The film attests to the fascination of class privilege and the intense commitment expected of servants to their masters, one that extends beyond salaried duties. Irene is well aware of the power her glamour provides and is intent on utilizing it to sustain her comforting, protected and insular existence. Sophie is also aware of the rules and the moral compromises inherent in the Brices' world, but sees it as the welcomed escape from a mediocre future. In this dramatic situation, Charles is the third player whose role gains prominence in the latter half of the film when the Brices are forced to flee France; his business dealings with the Germans are no longer productive and circumstances necessitate that the three relocate in London.

In order to facilitate the unique terms of Sophie's servicing relationship to the Brices, she moves willingly into their apartment. From this vantage point she gains surreptitious entry into the intrigues surrounding the Brices' relations. Like Sophie, the viewer is charmed and seduced by the Brices' world. Miller enhances the beauty

of the Brices' surroundings through the use of soft pastel colours, airiness, sunlight and space. The Brices are portrayed as being not particularly interested in the ramifications of their present good fortune; but it is clear that they are conscious of what is to be gained and will exploit the situation as long as the balance isn't overwhelmingly disturbed. Nevertheless, and significantly, despite the dubiousness of the Brices' actions, they are shown to have a kind and gracious spirit. Like Renoir's Marquis de la Chesnaye/Marcel Dalio and Christine/Nora Grégor in *La Règle du jeu*, Charles and Irene are genuine. Sophie is trusted increasingly, hence she gains access to the innermost intimacies of the Brices' affairs, while at the same time certain lines are firmly drawn. Sophie learns the rules as the narrative progresses: which of Irene's flirtations are harmless and necessary elements of social protocol and which become more threatening to the terms of the marriage. The war and the Brices' sudden brusque loss of favour capitulates a crisis on many fronts and imbalances the delicate grounds on which the existing relations of the three rest.

When the Brices and Sophie flee from Paris, the departure threatens Irene's liaison with a young Resistance fighter Jacques Fabert/Samuel Labarthe, and gives the relationship a stature it doesn't appear to deserve. Fabert is never fleshed out or well-defined and functions primarily to signify the diva's desire to have a heroic lover waiting to be called upon; and he serves as a romantic escape figure as social events veer out of control. The Brices' hasty decision to flee to London forces Sophie to solidify her commitment and she chooses to leave her mundane life in Paris and pursue her opportunities with the Brices. Her going to London involves leaving her mother, who appears to be alone with Sophie as her sole relation. Although Sophie's mother voices her concerns both for her daughter and the morality (or lack of it) underpinning what the Brices represent, Sophie's response is abrupt, cool and without regret; she packs up and leaves without hesitation.

Sophie is an unconventional and difficult character and doesn't solicit viewer identification. She lacks vulnerability and sentiment and her sullenness is ever-present. Sophie keeps her distance and seems almost harsh in her dourness. Bohringer's intense performance hints at a potential ruthlessness which never transpires; despite initial indications, *The Accompanist* does not go on to construct Sophie as the 'scheming woman' in the tradition of Eve in Mankiewicz's *All About Eve*. Although Irene and Sophie are stark contrasts to one another, ultimately Irene's power is never threatened. Sophie's unwillingness to relinquish her resentments intensifies as she witnesses what appears to her to be the grandeur of Irene's life. Her resentment manifests itself through her rejection of a potential relationship with a young partisan fighter Benoit Quizman/Julien Rassam, whom she meets on the boat to England. Through the film's denouement which takes place in London, Sophie's days are spent spying on Irene



and her lover Jacques who manages to join her there. The sequences in England darken both visually and in tone. Charles' powers as an impresario are greatly diminished and Irene is increasingly reliant on her romantic rendezvous with Jacques to give her life the theatrical weight to which she is accustomed. And, in turn, Sophie is increasingly alienated from the Brices as her role becomes more marginalized. In the London sequences, all three characters are aware that the rules which maintained their previous identities have shifted. Sophie's sense of betrayal and her feelings of hostility towards Irene intensify while Charles resigns himself tragically, to his loss. Ultimately Irene alone profits from their changed fortunes.

Miller's attitude towards his characters, like Renoir's, remains complex. As in the traditions of the melodrama genre from which *The Accompanist* draws, the characters are placed within a broader social and cultural context which includes the variables of class, ethics and

morality. Sophie's journey, which begins with her traveling on a train into Paris for the Brice interview, ends with her at another train station. As she began, she is still alone and without the ticket that will allow her to escape her future, limited as she sees it, by her class and the elusive grace and beauty which women like Irene can cultivate and exploit.

The Accompanist is controlled, carefully structured and sophisticated in its stylistic depiction of its thematic concerns. The film demands an active engagement from the viewer. Never abandoning the subtle elegiac tone it establishes early on, *The Accompanist*, like *La Règle du jeu*, is a film which doesn't compromise itself by offering a comforting resolution.

Florence Jacobowitz
Richard Lippe

LETTERS

To The Editors,

In the "editorial dissent" in your last issue (No. 32) warning readers about the "at best idiosyncratic, at worst offensive" views of Robin Wood in the article *Servants and Slaves: Brown Persons in Classical Hollywood Cinema*, the editors say, absurdly, that they're only publishing the piece "as a concession to *CineAction's* self-publishing mandate." In other words, the editors are reluctantly agreeing to uphold their own mandate. My, how noble.

If your latest issue is any indication, *CineAction's* days as a viable and relevant publication could be numbered. With the exception of Wood's (as always) thought-provoking article, the issue was mired in pretentious, "post-modernist," "deconstructionist" drivel—with a politically correct posture, of course. Films like *Year of the Dragon* were sneeringly dismissed as "racist" without qualification or even discussion. The high moral tone was suffocating and perhaps indicative of people taking themselves too seriously (a common characteristic among cliquy post-modernist intellectuals). The "editorial" by Kass Banning and David Fujiwara (the authors of the shameful "editorial dissent" mentioned previously) was a marvel of shallow and vague gibberish. Can anyone derive any real meaning from it?

I can only hope that in the future *CineAction* will not become a vehicle for the mind-numbing nonsense of the post-modernist clique. We need more genuine film analysis and scholarship which puts the films themselves and their effect on the viewer (reader), not merely ideology or theory, back into the discussion.

Sincerely,

Cosmo Vecchiarelli, Woodbridge

To the *CineAction* Editorial Collective,

I would like to comment and thank Kass Banning and David Fujiwara for a DAMN fine 'special issue.' 'Race-ing Home: Race and Cultural Identity' is one of the better special issues to have recently appeared on the newsstands that takes cultural production of and by the Other seriously. The issue is strong from the editorial to page 81 and then Boom!

What the HELL is Robin Wood trying to do? His 'Servants and Slaves: Brown Persons in Classical Hollywood Cinema' is a horrendous piece of writing that dismisses and takes for granted everything that comes before it in the magazine, not to mention the tremendous amount of work that has been done on the issues he claims to address. It is disheartening that such work gets supported by the Ontario Arts Council.

I do not wish to go through Wood's article bit by bit and point out every single problematic misreading, lack of critical support and other flaws, but I would like to point to one very important premise in his piece that clearly demonstrates a lack of depth on his part and a certain disconnectedness with current trends in theorizing "race." For example had Wood spent anytime seriously researching before writing he would surely have encountered Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, in which Morrison argues that an "Africanist" presence pervades American literature even when no blacks are supposedly in the texts. Had Wood encountered this argument he might have sung a different tune when he wrote that "the book [*Show Boat*] is not 'about' race" (p.86). To say

more about how Wood contradicts himself in the remainder of that sentence is to add further insult to injury. This brings me to the comments that open Wood's essay.

His assertion that he has only met "brown" and "pink" people is the most disgusting piece of biologism that I have encountered recently. To premise an entire article on such non-sense in 1993 is to bring back into debate a certain strain of biological determinism that has, if not effectively kicked out of the social sciences, definitely been discredited. Did Wood confer or share office space with Rushton before writing this piece? Enquiring minds want to know!

Wood's attempt at being critical bespeaks a liberalism that can only operate on simple reversals. Thus he must do everything possible to distance himself from what he feels some sense of accountability for.

Rinaldo Walcott, Toronto

To the Readers:

The 'Editorial Dissent' printed in the last issue above Part I of my article on the representation of the brown servant in classical Hollywood cinema has attracted a certain amount of attention (to the article, apparently, as well as to itself), and I wish to comment on it.

I am entirely in favour of the expression of editorial disagreement in cases where the editors consider an article worth publishing but wish to distance themselves from its position or certain of its ideas (although a far preferable way of doing this would be to write an answer for the next issue). This is clearly, however, not the situation here, as the editors have published an article they despise, and wish to reject in toto. The crux, then, is their statement that they are publishing it 'under protest,' with the implication that I somehow compelled them to do so. It is true that there has been a tradition in *CineAction* that articles by members of the collective will be given priority. It is a tradition that I personally question (and have done so at meetings of the collective). In the present instance I am baffled to know when the alleged 'protest' occurred: it certainly never reached me. The editors did not contact me at any point, from the moment the article was submitted, and at no point did they inform me that they found it 'offensive,' at no point did they suggest possible cuts or revisions, at no point did they request me to withdraw it or postpone it for a later issue. My phone calls (to ask if I might make small additions after the official deadline) were not returned (though the additions were in fact included). Readers will of course judge for themselves whether the opinions in the article are offensive (or, 'at best, idiosyncratic,' a term that I interpret as meaning 'not politically correct, not a member of the club.'). As for the offensiveness, I set out to offend two groups: white supremacists (who will certainly not wish to think of themselves as 'pink'), and those who practise a rigid and doctrinaire form of political correctness. In my opinion, the application of such a form to classical Hollywood cinema - the approach that always manages to arrive, by however circuitous a route, at the same foregone conclusion: 'This work does not conform to my own enlightened beliefs' - can only result in total sterility. I cannot help suspecting that the prime function of this form of critical discourse is self-congratulation, or the desire to be patted on the back for telling other members of the 'club' the things

they like to hear. I shall therefore be delighted if I succeeded. If, however, I have offended persons of colour, through ignorance or clumsiness, they have my profuse apologies. I felt very nervous about writing the article at all, and came close to abandoning it several times, since it attempts to engage with extremely sensitive issues, and I lack the confidence of my pink peers in my right to pontificate on matters concerning another culture, which I necessarily approach as an outsider. Consequently, I have decided to withhold Part 2 of the article until I get more feedback (none has been offered by the editors), and especially until I have read the promised response of Robert K. Lightning, a critic I greatly respect. Meanwhile, I would welcome constructive advice and comments.

Sincerely,

Robin Wood, Toronto

Dear Readers,

I prefer to spare you from further internecine squabbles but I feel I must respond, briefly, to the most blatant of Mr. Wood's mistaken assertions. At a *CineAction* meeting the collective insisted that his contribution be included in its entirety. Outnumbered, I complied (hence the word choice, forced, in our editorial dissent) with the proviso that I write a dissent.

No regrets,

Kass Banning

Persons of Technicolour in The Popular Cultural Publicity Sphere—A Reply to Robin Wood

Dear Editorial Collective Members,

I want to take the opportunity, first of all, to express my admiration for the work *CineAction* has done over the years in putting together an excellent, intelligent and politically engaging magazine. I am grateful to you all that this resource is available to me, that there is a magazine in which Canadian films, critics and scholars are regularly featured along with those from around the world. I want to particularly congratulate the collective for its latest effort, the Fall '93 issue titled "Race-ing Home: Race and Cultural Identity" which presents an extremely valuable discussion of issues surrounding the representation and genealogy of "race." These issues form a crucially articulated locus where the everyday dilemmas of left cultural politics and cultural critique find themselves—within the historical limits and absences inscribed by our late capitalist, international division of labour—having to return and puzzle over again and again.

There is another reason for my writing. Robin Wood's article "Servants and Slaves: Brown Persons in Classical Hollywood Cinema" and the editorial dissent prompts me to share the following. This situation is peculiar, undoubtedly, to the way *CineAction* struggles over its own cultural project but I think that you will all agree that its significance lies well beyond your collective praxis and speaks to a much wider collective situation. As is well known, our national cultural institutions are faced today with a demand that they examine their historical relationships with the processes of racialization in modern politics and identities and the ways in which these histories condemn our institutions to keep reinventing racist practices every time

the world changes around them with a bewildering jolt. As you well know, the way our institutions have responded to this political demand offers very little encouragement (cultural conservatism is at least, in this way, consistent). This context is what lends Wood's essay the significance which its surprising incomprehension of the issues of (cultural) politics of race otherwise denies. Nevertheless, this significance is also the reason why it seems to me that the readership of *CineAction* ought to be invited to respond, not only to the issue as a whole but to Wood's essay in particular.

The first clue that Wood's text has nothing essentially to do with 'race' and its cinematic representation is our immediate sense that all of this is very familiar. When magazines and journals started coming out with their first special issues on feminism, there would always be the obligatory article or two like this and today we read this kind of stuff all the time in letters to the editors of newspapers. The elaborate but irrelevant "proof", say, that affirmative action is actually reverse discrimination or non-sexist language reform is impossible because some dictionary, if not Samuel Johnson himself, defined "he" as a generic pronoun is a recurring example. The very absurdity of the argument makes it unassailable, I mean where do you begin. Experience in that ideological battleground has shown us that the "backlash against feminism," in the very fury it directs against women's bodies, incurs "collateral damage," as they say. Vitriol presented in the mass media against stereotypes of "feminism," especially when it wears the mask of civil even-handedness, can never risk the temptation to raise the stakes a notch, to go after not just the particular "special interest group" but also the universal idea of one. Campaigns against social programs, legal, medical and educational reforms that were won by the women's movement are thus inevitably escalated into campaigns against the idea of universal programs, public institutions and any other mechanism that would try to redistribute some of the resources and power from the tax shelters in which private property otherwise hoards them. This particular media loop—in which every public interest is represented as a special interest and the best defence against that menace is suggested to be the 'public sphere' of the market—becomes part of the background informational noise ventilating down the corridors of our publicly funded cultural and educational institutions - the great 'market place of ideas' of bureaucratically inflamed rhetoric.

Here the effective socio-linguistic and political history of the words 'black' and 'white' is blown into dust by an argument as dizzily powerful as it is self-consuming, immediately devouring the author's own ingenious correction ('pink' and 'brown') as well. We are not surprised, then, when it turns out that the real burden of the article is not the 'race' question but rather yesterday's media concept-prompt "political correctness" and yes, the Great Works. It is quite beside the point, politically, for us to 'decide' where on the map of the cultural politics of race this particular text falls. Is it sympathetic to anti-racist politics but mistaken? Does it, in its own hard-nosed and gruff way, thrust some hard-to-admit-truths in our face? Is it racist? These questions are absolutely the wrong ones to bring to this text. (Undoubtedly there are some very basic miss-steps such as when it is suggested that the way in which the world is morally coded "has nothing properly to do with race whatever" (p.82) nor, presumably, with any other political configuration of one's relation to an other and

which might be all quite true, in fact, on some alternate universe where the Laputan scheme for linguistic reform has been achieved and identities speak in gobs of paint). These questions are finally unhelpful because the politics of the text, the ideological battle it is fighting, is simply elsewhere. And the article itself is quite explicit about where.

With regard to lament for the Great Works, Wood actually confirms a suspicion I have long had. Occasionally when I make a mistake of admitting, in the company of enthusiasts of High Culture, that what I "do" is cultural studies or postcolonial studies, I now resign myself to the inevitability of being pinned to the wall by a friendly, eager but clearly worried person of refinement: But don't you think Mozart was the greatest musician ever? Isn't Shakespeare the greatest? the most wonderful, absolutely the best writer in the whole universe? don't cha, huh, don't cha? In these situations I've suspected that it is actually less cruel to disagree (you then give the person the opportunity to explain to you why you should think so) than to be truthful—yeah, sure buddy, if you insist, it's no big deal to me. This is not only a matter of the expansiveness of one's ability to be awed by human achievements, one able to sustain a mobile passion for *The Magic Flute* today, hip hop tomorrow, Navajo sandpainting, the modern Chinese novel or *Northern Exposure* the day after. The idea of that is as nobly affirmative as its actuality is pretentiously metropolitan and exclusive once you admit that such pluralist cultivation is structurally an impossibility for all but a very, very (privileged) few. It is also a matter of our relationship to the past. Wood is all-too clear about this when he asks "Can any work of the past measure up to our current enlightenment? What shocks me most is that so few seem offended by such a prospect: many will answer my question with an indifferent shrug and "So What?" My sense of appalling loss, of totally irresponsible and incomprehending waste seems to be shared by only an embattled few beyond the confines of academia" (p.84). But it is the question rather than the imagined answer which lies at the root of his torment. The Marxian attitude toward history, however, provides a release from this torment which is no longer peculiarly an intellectual's torment as it might first seem. Popular culture, for most, presents alternate visions of the past hanging over the present either as great crime, insult, injury to and waste of ethnic or national blood which corrupts and debases the present or as a glorious and exalted time of national or spiritual transcendence for which cults of remembrance must be maintained in order to find those heroes able to destroy age-old enemies yet again and keep the torches burning in the triumphant present. The two visions are necessary to each other such that the evidence convincing you of the truth of either one is provided only by the simultaneous obliteration and absolute forgetting of the other. The resulting schizophrenia, fitfully passing from rage at the "nightmare of history" needing redemption to ecstatic rapture at the divinity of human endeavour, from contemptuous misanthropy to charismatic celebrity worship and back again is the intolerable psychic economy of Reaction. Focussing these two visions stereoscopically off at a distance, Walter Benjamin's formulation "every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism," teaches us that it is something like a zen calm, the detachment with which one is able to say "so what?" in reply to each of the two images the past presents of itself to us, as the secret about the present whispered into the ear, that finally

enables collective praxis freed from the wheel of repetition.

Wood's discussion of the novel and film versions of *Show Boat* misses the point about the protest but not merely because it thinks the past is being accused and needs to be defended for being, after all, the past. The true accusation the present makes about the past is beyond all possible justification. But the same is also true for what the past is able to accuse the present of. Again all justification is self-deception. Nor is it because it reads *Show Boat* in the wrong context, the supposedly "historical" one instead of Toronto today. Rather the discussion repeats all the mistakes some others made in replying to protests over *Into the Heart of Africa* and the National Gallery's purchases of the Barnett Newman and Rothko paintings. Symbolic violence, subalternity along any particular axis of domination means, it seems, as Slavoj Žižek tells us, that culture is a process in which a humiliating, obscene message, which appears to also bear cryptic marks, but which nevertheless clearly names who it is about, is secretly passed around an imaginary crowd one either identifies with or against. (This reformulation, at least, is a way to renew the usefulness of the concept of stereotypes, once the lessons of Robert Stam's and Homi Bhabha's work have been learned). When we speak of racism, sexism, homophobia and class contempt in the mass media or of the "total flow" of television, is it not this "structure of communication" that we finally invoke?

Having said all this, I think I still want to insist that Wood's article is not really about 'race' (or film, for that matter) and that it tills a field far from where the battles of 'race' politics are being fought. The problem is that one cannot satisfactorily consign to this text the status of articulating within the civil framework of rational, public discussion neither a different theoretical point of view, or, without violently disregarding the official claims of the text, a different political position from the other articles in the magazine or in relation to the cultural debate at large. With respect to the different points of view one might take in a rational debate on issues to do with the cultural politics of 'race', this article differs in quite another way which is simply that 'race' here is pretext enabling a different set of signals to be sent out. We are then able to notice another striking feature of Wood's article, all those anecdotes about this or that student. Here we need to pay careful attention to a new genre of gossip suddenly everywhere the mainstream media is contiguous with some other institutional space. The relationship between teacher and student, everyone will admit, is one profoundly marked by the exercise of power both ways. But for that very reason both need a public sphere in which the exercise of power can be conducted politically and not opportunistically (i.e. within a formal system of rules which protects all parties). What then is that incessant whispering in our ear, those stories about monsters, mythological students who belong to no history of student movements (which can be either progressive or reactionary) nor bear any relation to the issues of underfunding, tuition hikes nor to any aspect of the real world, such that it is? What does this fearmongering have to do with negotiating the framework of civility?

Sourayan Mookerjee, Burnaby, B.C.

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Robin Wood

is working on his fourth novel and collaborating on screenplays with Jaime Humberto Hermosillo

